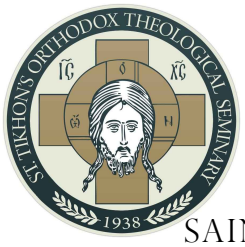

SAINT TIKHON'S ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ELDER SOPHRONY

THE GRACE OF GODFORSAKENNESS

&

The Dark Night of the Soul

By

PRESBYTER MIKEL HILL

A thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree

of

Master of Divinity

South Canaan, Pennsylvania

2017

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2017

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SAINT TIKHON'S ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Abstract

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The purpose of this thesis is to compare the experience of Godforsakenness, described by Elder Sophrony (+1993), and the Dark Night in the writings of the 16th century Carmelite monk, John of the Cross (1542-1591). Hieromonk Nicholas (Sakharov), in his study of Elder Sophrony *I Love Therefore I Am,* suggests such a comparison and this suggestion forms the impetus for the greater exploration conducted within the present thesis. Elder Sophrony represents one of the most articulate voices of the Orthodox Patristic tradition in our present times. Elder Sophrony speaks from his own experience of Godforsakenness with eyes transformed by his vision of Christ in Glory. Likewise, John of the Cross bases his teachings on the Dark Night largely on his own experience, but framed within a tradition quite different from Elder Sophrony. John of the Cross represents a long line of medieval Mystics, including Meister Eckhert and Francisco de Osuna, who were shaped largely by their late medieval interpretation of Aristotle, Augustine and Dionysius.

While a host of related sources surround such an examination, the present study will focus predominantly on the following primary sources: John of the Cross' *Ascent to Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* and Elder Sophrony's *Saint Silouan the Athonite, On Prayer, We Shall See Him As He Is,* and *Striving for Knowledge of God.* Secondary sources will serve chiefly to clarify the teachings of John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony. Encounters with both the Dark Night and Godforsakenness are common to the experience of every Christian. Therefore, knowledge of the respective teachings regarding these events and how they relate to Christian spiritual life is essential.

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I would like to extend the warmest expression of gratitude to my advisor and mentor, Dr. Christopher Veniamin. If I have managed to contribute anything of real value in the following pages, it is only through his patience and gentle direction. By means of his humble instruction, I sense that the present thesis has not so much shaped my thinking as it has shaped me as a person and I am immensely thankful for this, however much I may have resisted his efforts.

I would also like to thank Very Rev. David Hester for his labor as second reader, our beloved dean, Very Rev. Steven Voytovich for his tireless support during my peregrinations, and my fathers in Christ, Arch. Joseph (Morris) and Arch. Sergius (Bowyer), for their fervent and unceasing prayers on my behalf of my weaknesses.

I also wish to acknowledge my debt to Arvo Pärt, through whose music I was first introduced to the power of Elder Sophrony's word and to whose music much of what follows was written.

Finally, I would like to ask the forgiveness of my ever-forgiving wife, Rachel, my beautiful daughters, Anna, Sophy, Katya and Cossette, and my dear friends, Jonathan and Meg, who have all been marvelously patient with my impatience, kind with my unkindness, and understanding with my misunderstandings during the entire, plodding journey of this thesis.

Soli Deo gloria!

BE THOU MY VISION

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise
Thou mine Inheritance, now and always
Thou and Thou only, first in my heart
High King of Heaven, my Treasure Thou art

High King of Heaven, my victory won
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heav'n's Sun
Heart of my own heart, whate'er befall
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all

Attributed to St. Dallán of Ireland, 6th century
Translated by Eleanor Hull

INTRODUCTION

Christ is the true Light, which enlightens every man that comes into the world (Jn. 1:9). Therefore, we can confidently say that no man has ever been born, whether in village or in city, whether in times present or times past, who has not tasted and seen that the Lord is Good (cf. Ps. 34:8). In varying degrees and in diverse ways all have experienced God's Light, though only for an instant or with their last breath. It then follows that all have likewise tasted the experience of being forsaken by God. Though seldom comprehended, the vast majority in fact spend their life in a state of Godforsakenness. Having been visited by Light, we loved darkness (cf. Jn. 3:19) and God, respecting our freedom, has withdrawn. Throughout the ages, certain men and women have preserved the Light and been a light to others. However, the world as a whole has sunk deeper and deeper into darkness. The tender flame flickers, then dies out. Finding itself in darkness, the world cries out in pain, "God is dead."[1]

[1] "When Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: "Could it be possible! This old saint has not heard in his forest that *God is dead*!" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin Classics, 1969. p. 41.

I recall, while still quite young, encountering the figure of Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) by means of his 9th and final symphony (1909). I remember being struck by the tragedy of his life, woven with the remarkable intensity of his genius into the fabric of his music, "Hope and despair . . . held in uneasy equilibrium."[2] Mahler's heart, it seemed to me, burst with a thirst for life, for the beauty of creation and for its Maker, but also the knowledge that all he loved would be blotted out by his imminent death.[3] In the first movement, the orchestra repeats over and over again the motif from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908), "*Ewig, Ewig* . . . (Eternally, Eternally . . .)." But, there is no eternity for Mahler. He is resigned to bitter reality. There is no God and life is a mad farce. In the last movement, the music dies out completely to nothing, it is the final breath.[4] If only God were not dead!

The image of Mahler in pained acceptance of a reality in which there was no God, no eternity, and no truth struck me with especial force because the impression was mirrored in my own life at the time. I had lost the faith of my childhood and in the absence of any guiding Light I failed to see any purpose in a life that could only end in death. On more than one occasion, I thought of putting an end to the "mad farce." All truth appeared relative and all religion seemed no more than a senseless battle between these relatives "truths." Only much later did I learn the cause for the crisis of my faith: I had forsaken Christ-God.

Genuine faith requires that we preserve a "spiritual and divine sensation" (νοερὰ καὶ Θεία αἴσθησις).[5] Faith is not the acceptance of logically proven facts, it is sight transformed by a

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[2] Benjamin Zander commenting on Mahler's Symphony, No. 9, 1st movement: Andante Comodo. *Mahler Symphony No. 9.* Cleveland, OH.: Telarc, 1999.
[3] In 1907, Mahler had been diagnosed with a serious heart condition. In the same year, his four-year old daughter, Maria, died of Scarlet Fever. In 1909, Mahler's health was in critical condition. He died on May 18th, 1911 leaving an unfinished 10th symphony.
[4] Cf., *op cit.*
[5] Prov. 15:4 (Septuagint (LXX) quoted in Arch. Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 24.

"spiritual and divine sensation", it is a mind that has tasted and seen that God *is* and that there is no One like Him. Mahler, and so many like him, simply lost this "spiritual and divine sensation," and hence lost their faith. I cannot begin to express my gratitude that God did not abandon forever, but once more freely poured His grace upon me, and led me to the feet of Elder Sophrony.

Elder Sophrony's personal experience of Godforsakenness, his witness of both its horror and benefit, spoke with overwhelming strength. I remember driving home from a short retreat that I had made to a nearby monastery. I had picked up Elder Sophrony's *His Life is Mine* and begun to read it. I was listening to Arvo Pärt's *Berliner Messe* and pondering on Elder Sophrony's powerful words. At some point, the gravity and expanse of the life to which Elder Sophrony was witness dawned upon me and I was overcome with awe. Since that event, the word of Elder Sophrony has been an ever-widening horizon and a constant source of inspiration. I have found that Elder Sophrony's life and teachings speak with a unique immediacy to challenges of our times. It came as an enormous encouragement to know that in the person of Elder Sophrony was a man who had experienced the Godforsakenness of a post-Christian world and yet found a path to salvation.

When I first approached Dr. Christopher Veniamin, I had a great wish to write on the subject of Elder Sophrony's relationship to Arvo Pärt with the intention of developing from this study an Orthodox Christian approach to aesthetics. Dr. Veniamin, who was personally acquainted with Elder Sophrony, intimated that I had rather the wrong approach. How was it possible to objectively study such a subjective topic as "Orthodox aesthetics" without having become first acquainted with the Patristic *ethos*? I was at first taken aback. "Had I not read the

Church Fathers?" I said to myself. However, Dr. Veniamin had something quite different in mind than a quick perusal of Patristic quotes on the value of the arts. He wanted *me,* my *person,* to be shaped and molded by the *vision* of the Church.

The result is what lies before you. It will be of very little interest to the scholar, it will not shake the walls of academia with provocative revelations. It is simply a sketchbook, kept while studying Elder Sophrony's experience of the Godforsakenness. The primary purpose is to form in myself, however shallow, an impression of Elder Sophrony's vision of the Christian life. To facilitate this effort, I have chosen to use the life and writings of the 16th century Spanish mystic, John of the Cross, as a sort of sounding board by which to understand Elder Sophrony's unique voice more clearly. Thus, you will find in the following pages a summary of the lives of both John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony, with particular attention given to their personal experience of Godforsakenness and the educational prism that shaped their comprehension of this event. In addition, you will find an anthology of sorts related to their actual writings concerning the experience of Godforsakenness. Finally, there is a brief conclusion that compares the approaches of John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony, stressing the unique contribution that Elder Sophrony offers in his teachings regarding Godforsakenness to the challenges of our own generation.

In having the opportunity to spend the past year immersed in the writings of Elder Sophrony, it seems that I can understand and value more the experience of Godforsakenness that I witnessed, particularly in my youth. Likewise, I believe I have greatly benefited from the effort to learn more about John of the Cross and the tradition he represents. My hope and prayer is that you can also find help and comfort in their word: In the Night there is weeping but in the Light of the morning there is rejoicing (*cf.* Ps. 30:5).

CHAPTER ONE

John of the Cross:
The Historical and Theological Background

John of the Cross (1542-1591) appears within the chorus of late medieval mystical writers with especial prominence. The intensity with which he speaks concerning the Dark Night impresses upon the reader the conviction that John is uniquely acquainted with the experiences he describes. His determination to abandon all images in prayer, both sensory and conceptual, is exceptional when compared to the approach to prayer shared by many of his contemporaries.[6] The question then presents itself: what experiential and literary sources served as the inspiration for his profound and articulate teachings on the Dark Night? The pursuer of this inquiry immediately encounters a formidable barrier: John did not leave behind the intimate and detailed

[6] His closest collaborator, Teresa of Avila, maintains a vigorous meditative approach, even at the highest levels of spiritual contemplation. Cf. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle,* VII.1.6 (Kavanaugh, 175). Several medieval authors (Meister Eckert, John Tauler, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*) promote a more *apophatic* approach to the knowledge of God. There is, however, very little external evidence and no clear, internal evidence that John of the Cross relied on or was even acquainted with any of these writers. Cf. Dicken, *The Crucible of Love,* 301, 323.

account of his life as did his close acquaintance, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582). In his writings, John only rarely cites his sources and betrays no great reliance on any particular tradition other than Holy Scripture.[7] Nonetheless, several biographies of John appeared only a few decades after his repose, supported by eyewitness accounts.[8] From these, a picture emerges of the intense spiritual life that John experienced and that undoubtedly shaped his thought. In addition, certain observations can be made regarding the influence that John's extensive education made upon his teachings. John's lyrical image of the Dark Night remains uniquely his, but it is an image set upon a historical and theological framework of which it would be quite beneficial to become more familiar.

Juan de Yepes, who would later take the name John of the Cross, was born in 1542 in the small town of Fontiveros.[9] His childhood was spent in abject poverty. His father, Gonzalo de Yepes descended from a wealthy merchant family. However, his marriage to Catalina Alvarez in 1529, an orphan of the working class, resulted in Gonzalo's family cutting all ties of support. Gonzalo was forced to adopt his wife's trade of weaving and to rely on the meager income it brought to support his family, which numbered three boys, John being the last. Gonzalo died shortly after John's birth. His widow tried in vain to gain assistance from his wealthy relatives. In

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[7] Trueman Dicken, in his study of St. John and St. Teresa, *The Crucible of Love,* writes, "Specific references to earlier writers number less than a score. Dionysius the Areopagite (i.e. Pseudo-Dionysius) he names four times, and St. Augustine four times also. St. Gregory [the Great] and St Thomas Aquinas he mentions three times each, St Bonaventure twice, Boethius twice, and St John Cassian once" pp. 300-301.

[8] Four early biographers are: Alonso de la Madre Dios (exact date unknown, but prior to 1618), Jose de Jesus Maria (1618), Anonymous, published in Atwerp (1625), Jeronimo de San Jose (1630). These biographies can be found in *Primeral Biografias y apologias de san Juan de la Cruz,* edited by Fortunato Antolin. Salamanca: Junta de Castilla y Leon, 1991.

[9] The most authoritative biography of John of the Cross in English is: Crisógono de Jesus, *The Life of St. John of the Cross,* translated from the Spanish by Kathleen Pond. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958. Crisógono cites extensively the early biographies of Jeronimo de San Jose, Jose de Jesus Maria and others to support the details of his account. Several other excellent biographies of John of the Cross exist (Kieran Kavanaugh and Allison Peers) and have been referenced. However, we have largely relied on Crisógono's work and its translation due to the precise and exhaustive nature of the citations provided from primary manuscripts that are largely lacking in the other English translations of the life of John of the Cross.

1548, John's older brother, Luis, died, likely of malnourishment. The same year, Catalina and her two remaining sons moved to Arévalo. In 1551, she moved to the bustling market town of Medina del Campo to find work in its many weaving shops. Here, the nine-year old John was sent to a catechism school for the poor.[10] His aptitude and zeal for learning attracted the attention of a rich patron, Don Alonso Alvarez, who had him sent to the College of the Children of Doctrine, a grammar school administered by the Jesuits.[11]

At the Jesuit College, John studied Greek, Latin, rhetoric, and philosophy. Among his teachers, was the esteemed young Jesuit master, Padre Juan Bonifacio (ca. 1538-1606), who took John's education under his special tutelage.[12] When he had finished his education in 1563, Don Alonso desired that John become a chaplain of the Medina Hospital, where he was administrator. One would have expected John to readily accept this lucrative position, or at least to continue under the auspices of the Society of Jesus. However, at the tender age of twenty-one, John entered the Carmelite order, taking the name: John of Saint Matthias.

This decision should arouse little surprise judging from his later writings. In these, John expounds on spiritual life in a manner quite different from that taught within the Jesuit Order. There is only scant documentation regarding John's early spiritual life. It is only known that he frequently attended Mass, would spend long hours in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and

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[10] Catechism Schools were essentially orphanages where poor children were housed, educated and apprenticed to tradesman. In Castile in the second half of the 16th century there were such Catechism Schools in Salamanca, Valladolid, Palencia, and Guadalajara. His biographers note that John, though apprenticed repeatedly to different tradesman, demonstrated no natural ability in manual labor, which providentially led to his being sent to grammar school.

[11] Founded by Padre Sevillano in 1551. Cf. Carlos Ros, *Juan de la Cruz: Celestial y Divino,* San Pablo, 2011. This resource contains information regarding the founding of El Colegio de los Jesuitas, the faculty, subjects, and educational system used during the time of John of the Cross.

12 Cf. Fe´lix G. Olmedo, *Juan Bonifacio (1538-1606) y la cultura literaria del Siglo de Oro*. Santander: Sociedad de Menéndez Pelayo, 1939.

humbly fulfilled his obedience.[13] It is recorded, nonetheless, that, from an early age, he had a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, to whom the Carmelite Order was dedicated.[14] It is also seems evident, based on his later writings, that John, during his youth, had learned and experienced an approach to prayer and the spiritual life quite different from that which he saw practiced among the disciples of St. Ignatius (1491-1556) at the Jesuit College.

Ignatian spirituality was an outgrowth of the *devotio moderna,* a movement that encouraged the practice of projecting oneself into a Biblical scene through use of the imagination in order to arouse pious emotions.[15] Ignatius of Loyola built upon this practice in his *Spiritual Exercises.* The *Exercises* consist of a series of methodical instructions for developing meditative prayer and self-examination in the context of a four–week retreat. For each week there are series of successive meditations for imaginative, mental prayer. The first week involves thinking upon one's sin and the judgment to come, the second week on the life of Jesus, the third on His passion, and finally, the fourth on His resurrection. Images, used to arouse these thoughts, are strongly encouraged.

In contrast, John of the Cross, in his spiritual directives persistently criticizes the use of images and the imagination in prayer. John writes in *The Ascent to Mount Carmel*,

> Those who not only pay heed to these imaginative apprehensions but think God resembles some of them, and that one can journey to union with God through them, are

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[13] Cristógono de Jesús, *St. John of the Cross,* 23.

[14] The full title of the Carmelite Order is: Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. Many of John's early biographers recall an incident when John was still a student at Medina and was miraculously saved from a fall into a well. Some of these attest that John attributed this miracle to the Virgin Mary. Francisca de la Madre de Dios, reflecting on the incident, writes, "From that time he had a great love for our Lady." MS 12738, fo. 417. Cf. Cristógono, 305. Others, such as Juan Evangelista, were told directly by John that he had simply been saved by clinging to a board in the well. Cf. Cristógono, 13 n. 3. It seems quite plausible that the Virgin Mary did intervene but that John hid the miraculous intervention for humility sake. Nevertheless, his later devotion to the Virgin, regardless of its Genesis, is uncontested.

[15] Cf. "Devotio Moderna," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation,* 178-179. The *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis (c. 1418) is a well-known and highly influential work of the *devotio moderna*.

> already in great error and will gradually lose the light of faith in their intellect . . . Furthermore, they will not increase in the loftiness of hope, the means of union with God in the memory. This union is effected by disuniting oneself from every thing imaginative.[16]

John makes allowance for mediation at the early stages of spiritual life. However, his perpetual admonition is for the novice to progress beyond the need for discursive mediation; whereas, St. Ignatius of Loyola encouraged its continued use. Thus, while it is obvious from his later writings that John benefited from his instructions in Latin and Greek while at the College in Medina, nevertheless he bore little sympathy for the method of prayer employed by his teachers.

Instead, John was attracted to the Carmelite Order, finding in its emphasis on silence and prayerful contemplation a much closer affinity to his own spiritual outlook. The Carmelite foundation of Santa Ana had been made in Medina only three years prior to John's becoming a novice there in 1563.[17] The Carmelite Order itself had been founded in Palestine in the late 12th century.[18] Little is known of its exact origin. Sometime between 1206 and 1214, a group of hermits living on Mount Carmel requested a rule of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Albert Avogandro (1204-1214). The subsequent Rule of Saint Albert emphasizes the eremitic life of the Carmelite monks. They are ordered to build in solitary places and comprised of separate cells; a strict silence is to be kept from Compline (9pm) to Prime (6am); the monks are encouraged to be vigilant in prayer; and Mass is to be said daily.

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[16] John of the Cross, *Ascent to Mount Carmel,* III.12.iii (K. 284-285).

[17] On July 26, 1560, the property of Santa Ana was deeded for the foundation of a Carmelite Monastery, Rodrigo de Deunas being its benefactor and Padre Rengifo serving as its founder. Cf. Crisógono, 20-21; R. Fernandez, *Historia de Medina,* 442.

[18] Felip Robot (d. 1391), in *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and the Great Deeds of the Carmelites* (c. 1379), claims that the Carmelites were originally founded by Elijah the Prophet. The *Ten Books* contains many details concerning the history of the Carmelites since Elijah through the early centuries of Christianity until the time of the crusaders. There is every reason to believe that most of the material is fictional. However, the account does contain credible historical information related to the Carmelite Order's formation in Palestine in the late 13th century. It is also an important document due to its influence on the later Carmelite mystics: Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Filip Robot, *The Ten Books on the Way of Life and the Great Deeds of the Carmelites,* translated and edited by Robert Copsey. Rome: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2005. ix.

Another founding document from this period is *The Book of the First Monks*. It welds a close connection with the Carmelite monk and the Biblical figure of Elijah, as he is seen at the brook, Cherith (cf. I Kings 17:3-4). Life, according the unknown author, is comprised of two goals: To offer God a pure heart and "to taste somewhat in the heart . . . the intensity of the divine presence. "This", the writer continues, "is to drink of the torrent of the love of God" as God promised to Elijah. And, "It is in view of this double end," he concludes, "that the monk ought to give himself to the eremitic and prophetic life."[19] John, undoubtedly, integrated these teachings into his own spiritual practice. It is known from the account Alonso de Villalba, one of John's fellow students at Salamanca, that shortly after his profession, John began to keep the rigorous Primitive Rule.[20]

However, though devoted to silence and solitude, John nevertheless spent only one year at Medina before he moved to the bustling town of Salamanca in order to study at the Carmelite College of San Andrés. The college had been founded in 1548 and was situated in conjunction with the renowned Salamanca University. The student body at the college was very small; only nine other Carmelites joined John when he matriculated in 1565.[21] However, altogether nearly 7,000 students matriculated at Salamanca the same year and the streets and lecture halls were crowded with a colorful variety of seculars and religious orders.[22] John's decision to enter the College of San Andrés appears to have been made freely; perhaps he was prompted by the recent

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[19] Quoted in Kavanaugh, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross,* 11.
[20] Alonso de Villalba (Alonso de la Madre de Dios)*, Vida, virtudes i milagros del sancto padre Fray Ioan de la Cruz, Maestro i Padre de la reforma de la Orden de los descalzos de nuestra señora del Monte Carmelo*. MS 3929. Cf. Crisósogo, 24. It will be seen later that most Carmelite monks kept a relaxed (or mitigated) rule.
[21] Crisósogo, 28.
[22] Cf. Pedro Chacón, *Historia de la Universidad de Salamanca,* 37. First published in 1569. Can be found in "Semanario erudito de Valladares, vol. XVIII.

improvements made to the College by the Carmelite General Chapter of 1564; perhaps he was lured by the chance to study the greatest achievements of humanistic and theological learning.[23]

The University at Salamanca (chartered in 1254) was, at that time, one of the greatest centers of learning and scholarship in all of Europe, equal to the universities at Bologna, Paris and Oxford. An animated and diverse academic atmosphere pervaded the lecture halls and in this progressive environment John developed his own independence of mind. During this time, Gaspar de Grajal (1530-1575) taught biblical hermeneutics according to the "Scripturist" school in opposition to the established "Scholastic" approach.[24] Luis de Leon (1527-1591), the professor of theology, was not afraid to challenge the revered figures of Aristotle (4th c. BC) and Aquinas (1225-1274). At the College of San Andrés, the teachings of John Baconthorpe (1290-1347) formed the basis of theological formation. Baconthorpe was a Carmelite, Aristotelian in orientation but dismissive of many of the conclusions drawn by Aquinas and Dun Scotus (1266-1308). John's own caution toward the Scholastic approach can be seen as a direct reflection of this formation. His writings demonstrate a comfortable familiarity with the concepts and logic of medieval philosophical and theological thought; yet he remains free in drawing his own, unique conclusions.

Beyond this general observation, it is difficult to discern any element in his education to which John of the Cross was particularly indebted for his later teachings on the Dark Night. One tradition to which it would be impossible not to ascribe any influence on the Spanish Mystic is

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[23] This choice reveals an important distinction in comparison to Elder Sophrony, who quickly left the academic atmosphere of St. Sergius in Paris, to go to the "school of life" at the monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mt Athos. Cf. Arch. *Letters to His Family,* 32, 46.

[24] Grajal represented the progressive "Scripturist" school of interpretation as opposed to the traditional "Scholastic" approach. The "Scripturist" sought a literal interpretation of the Bible through a scientific analysis of language. John of the Cross betrays no sign of having adopted this approach in his lively use of Biblical allegory throughout his writings. Cf. Kavanaugh, *The Collected Writings of St. John,* 12.

the *Corpus Dionysium (CD)*.[25] Several translations of the Areopagite existed in John's days at Salamanca and there is every reason to believe that he was well acquainted with both the text and its accompanying medieval commentaries.[26] The triadic model of purgation, illumination, and union, adopted by John appears to finds it origin Dionysius.[27] John of the Cross directly quotes from the *CD* only four times, but significantly: once in each of his four major commentaries.[28] Each of these quotes is drawn from Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, referring to the phrase "ray of divine darkness" ("caliginis divinae radium").[29] This image of illuminative darkness is the aim and fulfillment of Dionysius' *via negativa*. John, in turn, equates the *via negativa* with his own evocative image of the Dark Night (*noche oscura*).[30]

The scarcity of John's direct quotations from the *CD* prevents the inquirer from discerning the degree to which he relied upon a direct reading of the text and the degree in which he was influenced by the Scholastic commentaries of Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141), Aquinas, and Scotus. John certainly adopted the systematic language of the Scholastics. Nevertheless, whereas Aquinas and Scotus treat the *via negativa* as an active intellectual *exercise* by which the philosopher deduces what God *is* from what He is *not*, John of the Cross consistently discusses

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[25] The work of an unknown author, though written with the pseudonym of St. Paul's disciple, Dionysius (cf. Acts 17:34). Modern scholars, such as Alexander Golitzen in his study, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius* (Cistercian Press, 2013), supports the conjecture that the unknown author was a Syrian bishop or monk of the late 5th or early 6th century, who penned the *CD* in an effort to fight the heresy of Montanism.
[26] Two texts from the 16th century preserved at the University of Salamanca are 1) J. d'Etaples' Stausburg 1504 edition containing Sarrazin's 12th century Latin translation of the *CD* accompanied by commentaries by Hugh of St Victor, Aquinas, Gallus, and Grosseteste. 2) Ambrosius Traversari's new Latin translation of 1436. Cf. L. Giron-Negron, "Dionysian Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Mystical Theology. *Modern Theology* 24:4 October, 2008, (695).
[27] Cf. Dionysius, *Ecclesiatical Hierarchies* V (PG 3.504A to 509A), *Celestial Hierarchies* III (PG 3.165B).
[28] *Ascent,* II.8.6, *Dark Night*, II.5.3, *Canticle,* XV.16, *Flame,* III.49.
[29] Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* I.1 (PG 3 1000A).
[30] L. Girón-Negrón, in his study "Dionysian Thought in Sixteenth-Century Spanish Mystical Theology" draws multiple parallels between the *CD* and the writings of both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

the "ray of darkness" only within the context of a passive *experience* of God.[31] For the Scholastics, the *via negativa* was made subservient to doctrinal affirmation. John, as we shall explore later, had quite a different purpose in mind. The Carmelite's cautious adoption of the Scholastic's presentation of Dionysius represents his general approach to his education: a discerning and reserved assimilation in service of his one goal: mystical union with God.

His reserve, nonetheless, did not diminish his academic achievements. The outstanding scholarship exhibited by John of the Cross is evidenced by his appointment as prefect of students at San Andrés.[32] Records indicate that the young Fray John was highly regarded not only by his teachers, but also by his peers, who marveled at both his erudition and moral austerity.[33] He bore all the marks of a promising professor, but John's ambition did not lay in an academic career. Kieran Kavanaugh asks, in his introduction to John's writings, whether his dissatisfaction lay in his distaste for an "atmosphere where the pursuit of knowledge too easily turned into a pursuit of self-exaltation, a quest for titles, chairs, promotions and awards?"[34] His heart desired above all else a life of contemplation, the life that had originally attracted him to the Carmelite order, and this first love whispered to him in the lecture hall. This attraction led him to write his dissertation on contemplation and its practice, based on his reading of Dionysius and Gregory the Great.[35] It is most unfortunate that this document was not preserved. Nonetheless, its writing demonstrates John's early orientation toward the life of quiet prayer, even while a student at Salamanca.

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[31] The degree to which John of the Cross differs in his adaption of the Areopagite's *via negativa* from his predecessors: Hugh of St Victor, Aquinas, Scotus, and the *Cloud of Unknowing,* falls beyond the scope of this present thesis. For an in-depth study of Aquinas' use of the *CD*, see A. Darley, "We Know in Part: How the Positive Apophaticism of Aquinas Transforms the Negative Theology of Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Heythrop Journal,* Sept. (2011).

[32] This position brought with it the responsibility of teaching and assisting the Regent Master in answering objections to various points of doctrine offered in lecture. See Alonso de la Madre de Dios, *MS 13460* (Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid), cf. Crisógono, 38.

[33] Cf. Crisógono, 38-39.

[34] Kavanaugh, *The Collected Writings,* 12.

[35] Cf. *Vida* of John by Jóse de Jesús María. Cf. Crisógono, 38.

The desire to intensify his life of contemplative prayer so plagued John of the Cross that he considered joining the rigorous Carthusian order.[36] Since the mid-13th century, the Carmelite Order had undergone a gradual metamorphosis: the original eremitic life had been abandoned in favor of a coenobitic one. The shift was seen as necessary for the survival of the order as they were forced to leave the austerity of Palestine and found themselves in England and Continental Europe.[37] Houses of the order were permitted in populated areas in violation of the Primitive Rule of St. Albert. In 1432, a Mitigated Rule was adopted, abolishing the necessity for silence and the abstention from meat.[38] It has been mentioned that John of the Cross individually maintained observance of the Primitive Rule but the severity necessary for its keeping was not supported by the laxity of his order.[39] Thus, John's interest in joining the Carthusian Order was well justified. However, in 1567 John of St Matthias (as he was still then known) was ordained to the priesthood and journeyed to Medina de la Campo to serve his first mass at the monastery chapel of Santa Ana. In Medina, he encountered the pivotal figure of Teresa of Avila. It was an event that would dramatically change his life. Instead of vanishing into the obscurity of the Carthusian Order, John would join Teresa's work and become the great reformer of the Carmelite Order.

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) had been a Carmelite nun of the Incarnation convent in Avila since the age of twenty. Like John, she had gradually begun to resent what she saw as an abandonment of the ideals that had inspired its founders. Five years previous to her encounter

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[36] The Carthusian order was founded by St. Bruno of Cologne in 1084. The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* describes the order as a "combination of Benedictine monachism and eremitical asceticism." The rule of the order (*Statuta*) proscribes a vow of silence and several hours devoted to mental prayer. (3rd edition, 293).

[37] The Carmelites began to relocate to Europe after Roman Catholic crusaders increasingly lost control of Palestine in the latter half of the 13th century. Acre, the last Roman Catholic stronghold in Palestine, fell to the Muslim Al-Ashraf of Egypt in 1291.

[38] Cf. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 289.

[39] Cf. Crisógono, 24.

with John, she had witnessed a sobering vision of hell. "There was no light," writes Teresa in her *Life*, "but all was thick darkness."[40] The event prompted Teresa to seek a more rigorous life for herself, a return to the Primitive Rule of her order, and utter poverty, symbolized by the garb of the barefoot (Discalced).[41] The result was her departure from the convent of the Incarnation and the founding of St. Joseph's Monastery of Discalced nuns in 1562.[42] Aside from reintroducing the Primitive Rule, Teresa promulgated the method of prayer known as *recogimiento* or recollection.

Recogimiento spirituality came to prominence in 16th century, primarily among Castilian Franciscans. It emphasized the need to withdraw into one's self by means of silence and meditation; in many ways it can be seen as a reaction to the discursive meditation encouraged by the *devotio moderna*. The *Recogidos* insisted that the lower faculties—intellect, memory, and will—must be suspended in order to attain a loving union with God. Two of the most prominent *Recogidos* were Bernardino de Laredo (1482-1540) and Francisco de Osuna (c. 1492-1540). In his *Third Spiritual Alphabet*, Osuna defines the practice of *recogimiento*:

> This exercise is also termed profundity, which term includes both darkness and depth; for it is based upon the deep and profound heart of man, which must indeed be dark—that is, bereft of human understanding—so that the spirit of God may come upon its darkness, and the waters of its desires, and say 'Let there be made Divine Light.[43]

The influence of Osuna's work on Teresa's own approach is evidenced by the praise she offers the book: "I did not know how to make my prayer, nor how to recollect myself. Therefore, I was

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[40] Teresa of Avila, *The Life of S. Teresa,* XXXII.5 (240).
[41] The practice of going barefoot or sandaled (Discalced) is commonly attributed to the influence St. Francis of Assisi and is closely connected with the emphasis on poverty within the Franciscan Order. Many of the monastic reforms of the 16th century also included the adoption of this proscription.
[42] Ibid., XXXVI.4 (277)
[43] Francisco de Osuna, *Third Spiritual Alphabet* in E. A. Peers, *The Mystics of Spain,* 58.

much pleased with the book, and resolved to follow the way of prayer it described."[44] Teresa reflects the *recogimiento* ideology in the theme of suspension, frequently found in her writings. In her *Life* she relates, "The soul suspended in such a way that it seems completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, it seems to me, is almost lost; the intellect does not work discursively, in my opinion, but is not lost."[45] The Dark Night of sense and spirit found in the writings of John of the Cross and the soul's suspension in the writings of Teresa of Avila can both be seen as a natural development of the *recogimiento* approach. Judging from the similarity of their ideals, it is cause for little surprise that Teresa's proposal to John, that he join the Discalced Carmelite Order, should be accepted.

After his brief meeting with Teresa in the fall of 1567, John returned to Salamanca for one more year of theological education. However, he maintained a written correspondence with Teresa. In 1568, he travelled with Teresa to Valladolid, where she was endeavoring to establish a second foundation.[46] Here, John witnessed the life of Teresa's Discalced nuns for several months, observing their prayers and serving as their confessor. Then, in October he journeyed thirty miles south of Avila to the village of Durelo, where Teresa had acquired a small farmhouse. On the 28th of November, 1568 John of the Cross (as he was thereafter known) and two other monks signed the deed of foundation, adopted the habit of the reformed order, and became the first Discalced Carmelite monks.[47] The poverty and solitude of Durelo was severe. A nun who first looked at the little hamlet with Teresa exclaimed, "Certainly, mother, there is nobody,

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[44] Teresa of Avila, *Life* IV.8 (17).
[45] Ibid., X.1 (Kavanaugh, *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila,* Vol. I, p. 53).
[46] Cf. Teresa of Avila, *Foundations* X.1.
[47] Aside from being barefoot, the Discalced Carmelites wear a rough brown tunic, belt, brown scapular, hood, and white mantle. The Carmelites of mitigated rule wore habits of fine cloth. The habit of the reform was purposely of poorer quality.

however great his spirituality, who can bear this."[48] However, the monks viewed the outward deprivation with inward joy.[49]

Added to the severity of the outward austerities was the interior, voluntary austerities adopted by the monks. Depictions of the cross, together with skulls adorned the small church. Yet, in this environment the monks struggled with renewed zeal. Teresa would recall later a visit she made a few months after the foundation: "Their prayer was so deep that it sometimes happened to them to go to Prime with a considerable quantity of snow on their habits and not to feel it."[50] The severity in which they practiced certain penances worried even Teresa; she feared "lest Satan might be seeking how to kill them." However, the courageous monks "made light" of her advice "to give up their practices."[51]

John and his fellow monks stayed in the Durelo foundation for only a year, finding a more accommodating retreat in nearby Mancera de Abajo. In the spring of 1571, the Apostolic Commissioner of the Carmelite Order, Fray Pedro Fernández, appointed John of the Cross Rector of the newly founded Carmelite College at Alcalà de Henares.[52] Here, John instructed the students by word and example in the austerity and *recogimiento* necessary to fulfill their vows as Carmelites of the reform. Such was his zeal that when Fray Pedro Fernández paid a visit to Alcalà some complained.[53] Yet, many others were won to the side of the reform under John's direction and the Apostolic Commissioner offered nothing but support for his work. However, John served in the capacity for only a year. His skills were needed elsewhere. At the bequest of Teresa,

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[48] *Foundations,* XIII.3 (478-479).
[49] Ibid., XIV.3 (481).
[50] Cf. Ibid., III.
[51] Ibid., XIV.11 (486-487)
[52] Cf. Crisógono, 62.
[53] Ibid., 64.

John travelled to Avila to become the spiritual director and confessor to the nuns of the Incarnation.

In Avila, he took up residence in a little cottage belonging to the Calced Carmelite men's monastery, opposite the Incarnation convent. His cell contained nothing but a table and one blanket, which served him as a bed.[54] He ate only very little and continued to wear his poor and worn habit. The ascetic warfare that John waged in his cell can only be roughly judged from the following account:

> Fray de los Apóstles, his companion at the time, found him one day in the little garden of the house he occupied next to the Incarnation. Fray John was pale, with less colour than usual, and he asked the cause. 'The devils have treated me so badly', he answered, 'that I do not know how I have remained alive.'[55]

That John possessed a thorough knowledge of the spiritual life is evident from his words to one of the sisters of the Incarnation. John's austerity of life had frightened the penitent and she worried that in hearing her confession he would judge her harshly. However, John replied, "The holier the confessor the gentler he is and the less he scandalized at other people's faults, because he understands man's weak condition better."[56] John, in his personal struggle for salvation, had discovered the darkness of his own heart and therefore could see with greater compassion the darkness in those coming to him for confession.

Providence allowed John of the Cross to quietly execute his ministry at Avila for over five years, from 1572 to 1577. Teresa continued to travel from Avila to found houses for Discalced Carmelite monks and nuns throughout Spain.[57] Supported by her saintly father-confessor,

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[54] Cf. Ibid., 74.
[55] MS 12738 Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, fo. 789. (Crisógono, 84).
[56] MS 19407, fo. 151; *MS* 13460, bk. I, chpt. 24, fo. 56v. (Crisógono, 75).
[57] Among these were foundations at Beas de Segura (1574), Seville (1575), and Murcia (1576). Over the course of twenty years, Teresa was responsible for the foundation of over thirty monasteries for the Discalced, both for men and for women.

Teresa's efforts of reform were reaping abundant fruit. However, some of the Calced Carmelites felt endangered by the reform movement and in certain circumstances, these concerns were justifiable. In 1567, King Philip II (1556-1598) obtained permission from Pope Gregory Pius V (1566-1572) for the appointment of two Apostolic Visitors.[58] Fray Pedro Fernández and Francisco de Vargas were chosen to inspect the houses of both the Calced and Discalced Carmelites and were given unlimited power to correct any issues of concern that they might find. Fray Pedro acted diplomatically, promoting the interests of both Calced and Discalced. However, Fray Francisco was heavy-handed in the area assigned to his inspection, handing over the Calced monastery at San Juan del Puerto to the reform and authorizing the founding of several other Discalced houses without the permission of the head of the Carmelite Order, Padre Juan Bautista Rubeo (1507-1578). The Calced Carmelites understandably made a protest both to King Philip II and to Padre Rubeo. A General Chapter was subsequently held at Piacenza, Italy in the month of May in the year 1575 to discuss the accusations of the Calced against the reform.

The pronouncements of this General Council were reserved: Madre Teresa was ordered to remain in one convent of her choosing and no further Discalced foundations were permitted. However, some among the Calced viewed the Council's unfavorable tone towards the Discalced as permission to act as they saw fit. In January of 1576, Padre Valdemoro, prior of the Avila Calced monastery, removed John from his cottage to Medina del Campo, where he was held prisoner for a month or more. The citizens of Medina sent a fervent protest to the papal nuncio, Nicholas Ormeneto. Ormeneto ordered John to be immediately released and returned to Avila, after which John was allowed a period of relative peace. However, Ormenteto died on June 18, 1577. Being abandoned of all protection, John was left to the mercy of the Calced.

[58] Apostolic Visitors are papal representatives commissioned for a specific task for a short duration.

The same year, on the night of December 2nd, a group of Calced monks accompanied by men-at-arms broke down the door of John's cottage in Avila, confiscated his papers and took him prisoner. John's life was never without struggle; however, this period would prove to be the darkest night in his outward history. He was taken by donkey, bound and blindfolded, to the Calced Carmelite monastery of Toledo, perched on the rocky right bank of the Rio Tajo.[59] He was confined to a room six by ten feet. It had no windows, only a little interior opening high up in the wall. He was often given no more than water and bread to eat. On Fridays, he was ushered into the refectory and made to kneel on the floor in front of the brethren. After the meal was finished, the superior verbally assaulted him. Then, each of the monks took a rod and flogged John's bared back. For many years, open wounds were visible on his back from these floggings and he bore their scars until his death.

John of the Cross spent nine months under these conditions. His captors whispered, "Why do we bother about this man? Let us throw him into a well and no one will know what has become of him."[60] However, it is evident that he viewed this period, shut out from all earthly light and conversation, cold and starved, as a profound gift and spiritual opportunity. A month or so after his escape, John encountered the following song while staying with Discalced nuns in Beas de Segura:

> *He who does not experience sufferings*
> *In this vale of sorrows,*
> *Knows nothing of good things,*
> *Nor has he tasted love,*

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[59] The monastery was home, at the time, to about eighty Carmelite monks. Cf. MS de la Biblioteca Prov. De Sevilla, shelf 331, n. 157, fo. 302. Cf. Crisógono, 100.
[60] Francisco de Yepes, *Historical Fragments of the Life of our Holy Father, Fray John of the Cross,* MS 8568, fo. 543. Cf. Crisógono, 103.

For suffering is the dress of lovers[61]

John was much moved by the song and remained motionless for an hour or more. He thereafter spoke to the nuns regarding his own experience and the degree to which God had allowed him to know the value of suffering.[62] Undoubtedly, the wisdom contained in his writings was perfected in the crucible of his sufferings, most acute in the experience of his imprisonment. It was not simply a coincidence that it was while in prison that he penned his monumental poem: *noche oscura.* Judging from the abundance of analogies to his imprisonment and escape in *noche oscura* and the two accompanying commentaries (*Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night*) it is very likely that John experienced his own Dark Night most vividly within the walls of his Toledo prison cell.

John was first confined to his prison cell in December 1577, the dead of winter. By August of 1578, his cell had become a cramped and stifling oven. It was nearing the feast of the Assumption of Mary (August, 15th) and John greatly desired to serve Mass on his Lady's feast.[63] His previous gaoler had been replaced with one more sympathetic to John's plight and less zealous in his watch. John used the relaxed watch of his guard to enter the adjacent room of his cell and to plan out a path of escape. John proceeded next to ream out the holes of the bolts padlocking his cell door and to sew together strips of blankets from his bed. Then, on a night sometime within the octave of the Assumption (August 15th-23rd) John made his escape.

Letting himself down the exterior of the monastery walls through use of his makeshift rope, he made his way to the ground, narrowly avoiding a fatal fall into the Taja river, far below.

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[61] MS 17511, Biblioteca Nacional in Padre Angel Custodio Vega, *Ciudad de Dios,* 1944, pp. 323-325 (Crisógono., 125 n. 11). The exact source of this song is unknown, whether or not the nuns at Beas composed it is unclear.
[62] Crisógono, 126.
[63] Ibid., 111.

He immediately went to the Discalced women's monastery of San José in Toledo where the nuns hid him from the frantic search of his captors. John was then secretly conveyed to the hospital of Santa Cruz, also in Toledo, where he remained hidden for two months. In October, John travelled to Almodóvar, about 330 kilometers (km) south of Toledo, to take part in a secret Chapter of the Discalced. Several resolutions were made, including a resolution to send a delegation to Rome, asking for the reformed order's secession from the Calced. Another resolution made John of the Cross superior of the Discalced monastery in El Calvario, near Beas de Segura and far from his enemies in Toledo. John, though still very weak from his imprisonment, left to make the journey of over 200km to take up his new charge. Meanwhile, the new nuncio, Felipe Sega, on learning of the secret meeting of the Discalced declared the decisions of the Chapter nullified, threw some of the Discalced fathers into prison and excommunicated all who had taken part, including John of the Cross. The delegation to Rome met with no more success. However, John arrived safely at El Calvario sometime late in October of 1577.

At the monastery of El Calvario, John took up the work of directing and building the monastery. He also frequently made the day's journey to the Discalced convent in Beas to hear to the nuns' confessions. For over a year and a half, John continued this ministry. In the June of 1579, he journeyed to the provincial center, Baeza, to found a college for the Discalced Carmelites. He served as rector for this college until 1582 while still maintaining his ministry at El Calvario and Beas. In the January of 1582, John was transferred to the monastery of Los Martires, far in the south of Spain, near Granada. John spent a total of nine years in this area,

fulfilling various roles, including that of Vicar-Provincial of Andalusia.[64] It was during this time that John compiled all his major prose writings: *The Dark Night of the Soul* (1584-85), *The Spiritual Canticles* (1584), *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (1581-85), and *The Living Flame of Love* (1585-86).

In his spiritual labors, John continued to progress, receiving from God "grace upon grace" (Jn. 1:16). While in Baeza, it is recalled how once while John was celebrating the Mass, after partaking of Holy Communion, he remained lost in prayer with the chalice in his hand. He had to be eventually reminded by someone present that the Mass needed to be finished; he had lost all sense of time and space.[65] On another occasion, it was observed by Madre Ana de San Alberto, prioress of the Caravaca convent, that while John was serving mass a light surrounded him and at the moment of communion John's face was seen to glow as tears streamed down his face.[66]

For the last decade of his life, John was able to enjoy the fruit of his much laboring soul. On June 22, Pope Gregory XII issued a Brief officially separating the Calced and Discalced Carmelites. After this event, the reform continued unhindered. New Discalced monasteries were permitted and governance was strictly limited to those within the reform. The persecutions of the 1570's ceased and the reform rapidly spread throughout Spain and beyond. Teresa, the beloved founder of the reform reposed in the Lord on October 4th, 1582. John continued the work of the Madre, founding additional monasteries in Malaga (1585), Madrid (1586), and Cordoba (1586). However, surrounded by success and praised by all, John kept his eyes on the cross, knowing

[64] As Vicar-Provincial, John was responsible for the administration of all Carmelite monasteries in the province of Andalusia, making him a very important and influential figure, a position which would later earn him the jealously and resentment of some of his brethren, notably Fray Francisco Crisóstomo, prior of the monastery at Ubeda.
[65] Cf. Crisógono, 154.
[66] MS 12738, fo. 38 and 565 ff. Ibid., (Crisógono, 244-245).

that the one wishing to follow Christ must not expect to avoid His path to Golgotha. Writing from Madrid to one of his closest spiritual daughters, Ana de Jesús, John encourages her: "Occupy yourself exercising the virtues of mortification and patience, desiring to become in suffering something like that great God of ours, humiliated and crucified—for this life, if it is not to imitate Him, is worthless."[67]

Concurrent with the dispatch of this letter in July of 1591, John was facing once more the persecution of his own Discalced brethren. John had already gained the disfavor of the Father-Provincial, Nicholas de Jesús María (Doria), when in 1586 he opposed the abandonment of the Jerusalem rite in favor of the Roman rite.[68] Doria wished this change in his efforts to further the process of gaining complete independence for the Discalced order and the change was made despite John's protest. In June of 1588, Doria created a new administrative body, the *Consulta*, and John was elected one of the six governing councilors. However, some feared that the *Consulta* would change the Constitutions handed down to them by Madre Teresa and protested. Among these were Ana de Jesús, prioress of the Madrid convent and Padre Gracian, the first Provincial of the Discalced. Doria had no patience for what he viewed as insubordination and wished to deal with the rebellion severely. John came to the defense of his spiritual daughter, Ana de Jesús, and directly opposed Doria on the matter of the Madrid convent's reationship to the *Consulta*. This interference doubly annoyed Doria. At a special Chapter, convened by Doria at Madrid in July of 1591, John was deprived of his position as First Councilor and for a brief period the Chapter considered sending him to Mexico.[69] However, Doria finally sent him back to

[67] John of the Cross, Letter 22, July 6th, 1591. MS 19407, fo. 14 (Crisógono, 278).
[68] As Father-Provincial, Nicholas de Jesús María (Doria) was head of all the Discalced monasteries.
[69] Jeronimo de San Jose, *Historia,* bk. VII, ch. 2, p. 699 (Crisógono, 276).

Andalusia with no definite assignment, content that he could no longer interfere with his revenge toward the nuns of the Madrid convent and Padre Gracian.

More than 300km separated Madrid and the Andalusian monastery at La Peñuela, John's destination. When he arrived, he humbly wrote to Provincial, Padre Antonio de Jesús, "I have come to be one of your reverence's subjects."[70] It is amazing that the co-founder of the Discalced would find himself exiled by his own order, a common monk deprived of all authority. John, nonetheless, thrived in the solitude and freedom of La Peñuela and gave himself wholly over to prayer. However, even in his remote retreat, John was not allowed to escape the persecutions of his brethren. Padre Diego Evangelista, commissioned with looking into the controversy surrounding Padre Gracian, sought to defame John of the Cross, vowing to deprive him of the Discalced habit and to have him dismissed from the Carmelite Order. He pestered those who knew John, his spiritual daughters and sons, hoping to uncover some misdeed that he could use to accomplish his vicious goal. He did this to no avail and yet he persisted.

In the meantime, John contracted a fever rising from an inflammation in his right leg.[71] At first, he refused to seek medical attention but, after receiving orders from vicar of the monastery, he obediently went to Ubeda, a journey by mule of about 40km. Many of the brothers of the monastery at Ubeda were overjoyed to see the beloved spiritual father. However, the prior, Fray Francisco Crisóstomo, greeted the sick man with hostility, having been previously called to account when John served as Vicar-Provincial of Andalusia. Crisóstomo gave John the "poorest and most narrow cell" in the monastery.[72] Soon after his arrival, the inflammation grew much worse. He was operated upon by a surgeon without any sedative. The surgeon removed large

[70] MS 12738, fo. 850 (Crisógono, 281).
[71] Cf. Crisógono, 287.
[72] MS de Ubeda, Vol. I, fo. 353. (Crisógono, 292).

pieces of flesh from John's foot and leg, trying to relieve the pressure but to no avail; the infection spread to John's back. Knowing that he was soon to die, John called for the prior, Crisóstomo, who had repeatedly complained of having the sick man on his hands. Yet, instead of remonstrating him, John asked for his forgiveness. At this gesture, Crisóstomo departed the cell in tears, deeply moved and repentant.[73] On December 14th, a few minutes after midnight John of the Cross put his lips to the crucifix he perpetually held and said, "*In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum* (Into Thy hands, I commend my spirit)" and quietly breathed his last. His face was noticed by those present to become transparent with radiance and his body, full of wounds, to exude a fragrance of roses.[74]

[73] Crisóstomo is noted to have become a fervent promoter of John's sanctity and an imitator of his life. He died on November 24th, 1608 and was considered a saint by many. Cf. Crisógono, 304.
[74] Those present at his death included: Alonso de la Madre de Dios (author of: *Suma de la vida y Milagros del Veneralve Padre Fray Juan de la Cruz*) and Padre Antonio de Jesús, the then-current Vicar-Provincial of Andalusia.

CHAPTER TWO:

John of the Cross:
The Dark Night of the Soul

John of the Cross, in the prologue to *The Ascent of Mount Carmel,* relates:

> It will happen to individuals that while they are being conducted by God along a sublime path of dark contemplation and aridity, in which they feel lost and filled with darkness, trials, conflicts, and temptations, that they will meet someone who, in the style of Job's comforters, will proclaim that all of this is due to melancholia, depression, or temperament.[75]

How few are those who understand the mystery of the Dark Night![76] John betrays no surprise at this ignorance. He remarks, "Only those who suffer them will know what this experience is like,

[75] John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel,* Prologue (Kavanaugh, *The Collected Writings,* (K), 116).
[76] For contemporary approaches to the experience of the Dark Night see the following articles from two popular Christian magazines. The authors give a fairly accurate view of the efficacy of the dark night but fail to grasp the full weight of the experience contained therein. Each reduces the Dark Night to a quickly passing feeling of God's abandonment. No mention is made of purgative, positive effect of the Dark Night, nor the resulting expulsion of every image in prayer. See Chuck DeGroat, "Three Truths About the 'Dark Night of the Soul,'" *Christianity Today,* "web exclusive." And R.C. Sproul, "Spiritual Depression: The Dark Night of the Soul." *Table Talk,* Ligonier Ministries, Feb 1st, 2008.

but they won't be able to describe it."[77] And yet, how essential the experience of the Dark Night is, so much that John argues that perfection and union with God is impossible without it.[78] John's purpose therefore, in presenting his teachings on the Dark Night, is to comfort and encourage those under his spiritual direction to bear patiently the terrors of the Dark Night. He wishes neither to alleviate the pain of the experience nor to seek a quick remedy by revealing some sin or source of melancholy. Instead, John wishes to show the good contained in this experience.[79] He writes, "If such persons could be assured that all is not over and lost but that what they suffer is for the better—as indeed it is—and that God is not angry with them, they would be unconcerned about all these sufferings; rather they would rejoice."[80] The Dark Night is not to be avoided but to be patiently endured, even expected, by anyone who seeks to deny himself, take up his cross and follow Christ (cf. Lk. 16:24).[81]

The two primary works in which John provides a guide for spiritual directors and ascetics concerning the Dark Night are: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (*Subida del Monte Carmelo,* 1581-84) and *The Dark Night* (*Noche Oscura,* 1584-85). Both are commentaries on the poem, "One dark night" ("En una noche oscura"), written either while John was imprisoned in Toledo or shortly thereafter (1578). The imagery of John's escape appears in the poem and commentary quite unmistakably.[82] The significance has already been noted of the fact that John did not produce any of his major writings until after his imprisonment.[83] It would appear that his writings were the direct result of this profound experience. That John waited for the experience and

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[77] John, *Ascent,* Prologue (K. 115).
[78] Cf. Idem., *Night* II.5.1; II.9.3; *etc*.
[79] *Night,* II.16.7 (K. 432). "Do not be afflicted, but think of this as a good fortune (*buena dicha*)."
[80] Ibid., 13.5 (K. 425).
[81] Cf. Idem., *Ascent* II.7.7 (K. 171).
[82] Cf. Ibid., I.1.3 (K. 119).
[83] Cf., p. 22.

enlightenment of grace before he wrote is further supported by a comment made in the prologue to *The Living Flame*. He writes to Ana de Jesús, "Because of my want of recollection, I have deferred this commentary until now, a period which the Lord seems to have uncovered some knowledge and bestowed some fervor."[84] The detail of John's description and guidance concerning the Dark Night leaves little doubt that he was intimately acquainted with the entire breath and scope of the spiritual life. His pen was not taken up in idle speculation but in the wake of intense experience and for the benefit of those who found themselves buffeted by the sea, with Jesus seemingly asleep in the boat (cf. Lk 8:23-25).

The image of the Dark Night can be easily misconstrued and reduced to the level of a brief period of despair and doubt. The Dark Night in the teachings of John of the Cross is quite complex and multifaceted, encompassing the whole of the spiritual life rather than a specific event. John relates that the Night of the Spirit alone can last many years.[85] John uses several *schemata* to describe the progression of the Dark Night. Graphically depicted in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* is John's pictorial representation of Mount Carmel.[86] In this image, though rather cluttered and complicated, the observer can make out two paths: the way of the imperfect spirit and the way of the perfect spirit. The way of the perfect spirit is a path of negation: John has penned "nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the Mount nothing." What appears, at a cursory glance, to be a detailed and methodical map for attaining perfection, upon closer study is shown to be nothing more than a signpost toward the path of negation, echoing St. Gregory of Nyssa's

[84] John, *The Living Flame,* Prologue (K. 638).
[85] Idem., *Night* II.7.4.
[86] Cf. Appendix, Plate II.

Life of Moses (390 A.D.) and Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*.[87] In these, Mount Sinai is the *locus* of mystical vision *par excellence*. John, reflective of his connection with the Carmelite Order, simply replaces Mount Sinai with Mount Carmel. However, as provocative as the image might appear, John's use of it is brief and superficial. He instead organizes the majority of his analysis around a model consisting of two nights: the Night of the Senses and the Night of the Spirit.

John adheres in his anthropology to the structure of Aquinas, dividing the person into body and soul, but seeing them united in one subject (*un solo supuesto*).[88] He further adopts a division of the superior aspect of the soul into intellect, will, and memory (*entendimiento, voluntad, memoria*), terminology familiar from the writings of Augustine and Aquinas.[89] However, beyond these general assumptions, little influence from Thomist anthropology can be detected.[90] His main interest lies in the unique division he perceives between what he terms the sensory (*sensitiva*) or lower part of the soul (*la parte inferior*) and the spiritual (*espiritual*) or higher part of the soul (*la parte superior*). It is these two parts of the soul to which the consecutive "nights" are directed. The first night, the Night of the Senses is a purgation of the lower part of the soul; the Night of the Spirit is the purgation of the higher aspect of the soul: the intellect, the will, and the memory. Within this *schematia*, John intimates the three stages of the spiritual life, coined by Dionysius: purgation, illumination, perfection (κάθαρση, φωτισμό,

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[87] St Gregory's account of Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai, *Life of Moses,* 152-169 (Malherbe and Ferguson, 91-97). Dionysius' similar account in *Mystical Theology,* I.3. See also St. Ephraim's *Hymns on Paradise,* Hymn II.12 (Brock, 89).

[88] Aquinas departed from Platonic anthropology, adhering more closely to Aristotle but advancing past the Philosopher to advocate that the intellectual soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Cf. *Summa* I.76.

[89] Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitas*, XV.7.12 and Aquinas, *Summa,* I.78-79.

[90] For example, Aquinas divides the soul into sensitive and intellectual, whereas John of the Cross divides the soul into Sensitive and Spiritual, the intellect being a power of the higher soul (like in Aquinas) but a power, along with the will and memory that must be denuded (*desnuda*). Cf. Aquinas, *Summa,* I.78-79.

τελειότητα).[91] In the second Night, purgation is gradually transformed into illumination. Finally, the Night of the Spirit is eclipsed by the third stage: the Union of Love. In what follows, we will adopt John's division of the Dark Night, beginning with the Night of the Senses and progressing to an examination of the Night of the Spirit. Concluding remarks will be offered on the sublime state of the Union of Love or perfection, poetically described in John's *The Flame of Love.*

David the King cries out in the sixty-third Psalm: "O God, Thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is" (Ps. 63:1). This is the Dark Night described by John of the Cross. The Dark Night is aridity in prayer, a drying up of spiritual zeal, a drought of spiritual consolation, and more than anything else: a sense that God has forsaken the soul. John explains that at the beginning of spiritual struggle God bestows on the soul a bounty of spiritual gifts, warm feelings, and a zeal for spiritual labor. Everything comes easily: the sun of God's favor shines brightly on the springtime of spiritual youth. During this period, John relates, "The soul finds its joy . . . in spending lengthy periods at prayer, perhaps even entire nights; its penances are pleasures; its fasts, happiness, and the sacraments and spiritual conversations are its consolations."[92] The beginner finds delight and satisfaction in discursive meditation on the Passion of our Lord and imagines the joys experienced in heaven. John concedes that such meditation is helpful for beginners—to wean them from "worldly things"[93]—but warns that soon these souls must cross a "dry and thirsty land" (Ps. 63:1).

John writes, "Souls begin to enter this dark night when God, gradually drawing them out of the state of beginners . . . begins to place them in the state of proficients . . . so that by passing

[91] Cf. Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchy*, III.2; *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* V.7.
[92] John, *Night,* I.1.2 (K. 362).
[93] Ibid., I.8.3 (K. 376).

through this state they may reach that of the perfect."[94] In other words, John argues that the Dark Night is unavoidable if one is to grow spiritually. He further encourages those finding themselves bereft of the joys met with at the commencement of the spiritual life to take heart: God has not actually abandoned them but is rather leading them to a higher life. Though it seemed to the beginner that they possessed a great abundance of spiritual gifts and experiences, John reveals the imperfection of the first stage and the necessity of advancement through the Dark Night.

Using the widely known model of the Seven Deadly Sins,[95] John exposes the imperfections common to beginners. His exegetical approach is unique in so much as he describes the vices normally associated with the base passions and reveals their presence in works of piety and spiritual fervor. John upbraids those who collect images, rosaries, relics, and crosses, "like children in trinkets."[96] He shows that this behavior is nothing more than spiritual avarice. He writes, "Any appetite for these things must be uprooted if some degree is to be reached."[97] He adds, "True devotion comes from the heart and looks only to the truth and substance (*sustancia*) represented by spiritual objects . . . everything else is an imperfect attachment and possessiveness."[98]

Another spiritual vice to which John devotes particular attention is pride. It is virtually impossible for beginners to avoid some measure of pride. The fervency and ease by which they enter spiritual labors cause the impression that they are not as other men. These souls lack the experience and discernment to recognize that these gifts come from no virtue of their own. John

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[94] Ibid., I.1.1 (K. 361).
[95] The Seven Deadly Sins or Vices finds its origin in the writings of Evagrius Pontius (345-399). John Cassian's use of Evagrius' model in his *Conferences* (c. 419) was highly influential in the West. Pope St. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) took Cassian's model of eight deadly sins and reduced it to the widely recognized list of seven: Pride, Avarice, Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Anger, and Sloth.
[96] *Op. cit.,* I.3.1 (K. 366).
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.

remarks, "The devil, desiring the growth of pride and presumption in these beginners, often increases their fervor and readiness to perform such works . . . aware that all these works and virtues are worthless for them, but even become vices."[99] Beginners are often "anxious that God remove their faults and imperfections."[100] But, John argues, "Their motive is personal peace rather than God."[101] These become depressed at having their faults revealed, thinking, as they did, that they were already saints, and they become irritated at themselves and others, revealing the many other vices that lay within. The presence of these vices demonstrate the need that a further purgation be undergone before the soul can be perfected. The first stage of this purgation is the Night of the Senses.

If the spiritually immature are "always hunting for some gratification," then, in the aridity and darkness of the Night of the Senses, these souls are weaned by God.[102] John relates, "When in their opinion the sun of divine favor is shining most brightly on them. . . God darkens all this light and closes the door and the springs of sweet spiritual water."[103] The consolations experienced by the beginner were all on the sensory level[104] and were thus vulnerable to a multitude of vices. God, wishing to lead the sensory soul to drink from the pure waters flowing from the spiritual soul, dams the stream of sensual consolations. This causes the sensory soul excruciating pain. John describes it as "a thirst that kills;"[105] kills, that is, the *modus operandi* that the soul had hitherto become accustomed. The soul finds that it is being conducted along a

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[99] Ibid., I.2.2. (K. 363).
[100] Ibid., I.2.5 (K. 364)
[101] Ibid.
[102] Cf. Ibid., I.7.5 (K., 375).
[103] Ibid., I.8.3 (K., 376).
[104] The senses, as discussed by John, are not the physiological senses (physical eyes, physical ears, etc.). Instead, the senses refer to the metaphysical senses of the soul that correspond to the physical senses but remain distinct. See Dicken, *Crucible of Love,* p. 329 for further explanation.
[105] Ibid., I.11.1 (K., 383).

path "beyond the range of the imagination and discursive reflection."[106] The spiritual exercises, the images, and meditations that used to warm the person's hearts with fervent love for God are suddenly useless. They are led "in a desert land, without water, dry, and without a way" (Ps. 63:1). Turning and twisting in torment, finding no consolation in what once brought them euphoria, they fear that God has forever abandoned them due to some hidden sin or shortcoming.

Without seeking in any wise to minimize the pain of the Night of the Senses, John nevertheless encourages his reader thus:

> This glad night and purgation causes many benefits . . . so numerous are these benefits that, just as Abraham made a great feast on the day of his son Isaac's weaning [Gen. 21:8], there is great rejoicing in heaven that God has now taken from this soul its swaddling clothes; that He has put it down from His arms and is making it walk alone; that He is weaning it from the delicate and sweet food of infants and making it eat bread with crust; and that the soul is beginning to taste the food of the strong . . . which in these sensory aridities and darknesses is given to the spirit that is dry and empty of the satisfactions of sense.[107]

John goes on to explain that the foremost benefit of this Dark Night is the "knowledge of self and of one's own misery."[108] In the Night of the Senses, the soul "considers itself to be nothing and finds no satisfaction in itself because it is aware that of itself it does nor can do anything."[109] It might appear difficult, at first, to see this knowledge of one's poverty as a gift, as a "sheer grace."[110] Yet, it may be understood by observing that in those with even the slightest trace of self-satisfaction the exclusive thirst for God vanishes. This is precisely the purpose of the Night of the Senses: to wean the soul from seeking nourishment in anything less than God,

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[106] Ibid., I.10.2. (K., 381).
[107] Ibid., 12.1.1 (K., 384).
[108] Ibid., I.12.2 (K., 385).
[109] Ibid.
[110] Cf. the first stanza, third line of *Noche Oscura*. "¡oh dichosa ventura."

preeminently the *self.* Knowledge of one's own poverty is the "narrow way" (cf. Matt. 7:14) by which all self-satisfaction is purged.

When God was supporting the soul in the first period of its life, its comfort consisted primarily in the sensible affects of God's presence and not God *Himself.* [111] Communion with God, according to John, can be only genuinely experienced in the higher aspect of the soul, the spiritual soul. This can only occur when the sensible soul has been entirely darkened and purified. John remarks, "Job was not prepared for converse with God by means of those delights and glories that he says he was accustomed to experience in his God. But the preparation for this converse embodied nakedness on a dunghill, [and] abandonment" (cf. Job 2:8).[112] It is in the dryness and emptiness of the Night of the Senses that the soul learns to humble itself, to recognize its own poverty, and to banish the first spiritual vice: pride. John writes, "By these trials [the soul] is truly humbled in preparation for its coming exaltation."[113] John continues by describing the manner in which the Night of the Senses starves the seven spiritual vices earlier recounted. Spiritual avarice, for example, is overcome since in this Night the soul no longer finds delight in objects of piety and exterior practices of devotion, "but rather finds them distasteful and laborious."[114]

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel,* John further divides the Night of the Senses into active and passive modes.[115] The discussion has hitherto dwelt on the passive mode: God's withdrawal of sensory satisfaction. Yet, the active mode is also present in John's writings. In the first book of

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[111] Cf. *Living Flame of Love*, 3.51: "To journey to God, the will must walk in detachment from every pleasant thing . . . It thus carries out well the commandment of love, which is to love God above all things; this cannot be done without nakedness and emptiness concerning them all."
[112] Idem., *Night,* I.12.3 (K., 386).
[113] Ibid., I.14.4 (K., 393).
[114] Ibid., I.13.1 (K., 389).
[115] Idem., *Ascent,* I.13.1 (K., 147).

The Ascent, he dictates to the soul, "Endeavor to be inclined always: not to the easiest, but to the most difficult; not to the most delightful, but to the most distasteful . . . not to wanting something, but to wanting nothing."[116] John speaks of this approach as a method: "By this method you should endeavor, then, to leave the senses as though in darkness;"[117] but this "method" is nothing more than a habitual mode of self-denial. Beyond this, John only encourages patience in the Night of the Senses. He writes, "Those who are in this situation should feel comforted; they ought to persevere patiently and not be afflicted."[118] The main activity of the soul during the Night of the Senses is thus stillness and perseverance.[119] The soul waits for the moment when it can say, "My house being now all stilled,"[120] thus escaping the torments it bore while shackled by its attachment to the senses.[121] It is thus allowed to live freely, nourished by the higher, spiritual soul, the sensible soul having been silenced.

The Christian who toils through the first Night and enters the blessed calm that follows might continue at this intermediate stage for an extended period of time. John writes, "Having emerged from the state of beginners, the soul usually spends many years exercising itself in the state of the Proficient (*Aprovechados*)."[122] Some will not progress to the second Night of the Spirit at all. These are merely led through the Night of the Senses to exercise and humble their souls but not to entirely wean them from sensory satisfaction or discursive meditation. John explains, "God does not bring to contemplation all those who purposely exercise themselves in

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[116] Ibid., I.13.6 (K., 149).
[117] Ibid. I.13.5 (K., 149).
[118] Idem., *Night,* I.10.3 (K., 381).
[119] Cf. Ibid., I.14.1. (K., 392).
[120] *Noche Oscura,* Stz 1. Ln. 5 (K., 50).
[121] Cf. John's escape from the Toledo prison, poetically described in *Noche Oscura* and glossed upon in *Night* II.14.3-15.1 (K., 429-430).
[122] John, *Night,* II.1.1 (K., 395).

the way of the spirit, or even half. Why? He best knows."[123] Nevertheless, those Proficients who will later be led through the second Dark Night enjoy the fruits of their first labors for a time. The principle fruit is the freedom of the soul to pray without images. John writes, "Its imagination and faculties are no longer bound to discursive meditation . . . the soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight."[124] The soul is satisfied, no longer by images projected by its senses, but it instead receives interior delight directly from its spirit.

Yet, rooted deep within this spiritual satisfaction is an attachment to something *other*, something that is not God. Moreover, John contends that the senses can be never wholly purged until the spirit is refined of all its impurity, since both aspects of the soul form "one suppositum (*solo supuesto*)."[125] He writes, "All good and evil habits reside in the spirit and until these habits are purged, the senses cannot be completely purified of their rebellions and vices."[126] Otherwise, the soul will be continually in danger of falling, of being deceived by the enemy, and of being captured once again by its own senses. For all these reasons, John insists that the dread Night of the Spirit must be undergone if the soul is ever to reach the state of security and Union with Love.

The primary difference between the first and second Dark Night is that the pain of the first Night was felt in God's withdrawal of sensory consolation whereas the pain of the second Night is the inflow of God's own divine light. John anticipates the inevitable question: "Why, if it

[123] Ibid., I.9.9 (K. 380).
[124] Ibid., II.1.1 (K. 395).
[125] Ibid. II.3.1 (K. 398).
[126] Ibid.

is a divine light . . . does the soul call it a dark night?"[127] His answer is two-fold: firstly, because the inflow of divine wisdom exceeds the capacity of the soul.[128] Secondly, since the soul is not yet purified and God-like, the divine light scourges the soul of the impurities therein, a process that is "painful, afflictive and dark for the soul."[129] John supplies two examples from the natural world to illustrate his response: the Owl, who becomes more blind the greater the light,[130] and the Log, at first darkened by the application of fire but later enkindled and transformed into fire.[131] In the same way, the soul, at first, perceives God's light as a burning fire. John relates, "The soul, because of its impurity, suffers immensely at the time this divine light truly assails it. When this pure light strikes in order to expel all impurity, persons feel so unclean and wretched that it seems God is against them."[132] But then, later, when the soul has been thoroughly purged "the soul's suffering terminates, and joy remains."[133]

The principle undergirding John's reasoning is the philosophical premise, "Two contraries cannot exist in one subject."[134] According to John, union presupposes complete conformity to the will of God. He writes in *The Ascent,* "The supernatural union exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other."[135] Consequently, John adds that a soul must be purged of everything unlike God so that it may "receive the likeness of God."[136] Anything that is not God, anything that is not the divine

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[127] Ibid., II.5.2 (K. 401).
[128] To defend this point, John relies upon the "principle of the Philosopher" (Aristotle) that: "clearer and more obvious divine things are in themselves, the darker and more hidden they are to the soul naturally" (*Night,* II.5.2), cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* II.1.
[129] *Op. cit.*
[130] Ibid., II.5.3 (K. 402).
[131] Ibid., II.10.1 (K. 416).
[132] Ibid. II.5.5 (K. 402).
[133] Ibid., II.10.5 (K., 417).
[134] Ibid., II.5.4 (K., 402). Cf. Augustine, *Doctrinal Treatises,* XIV (NPNF, Series I, Vol. III).
[135] Idem., *Ascent,* II.5.3 (K., 163).
[136] Ibid., II.5.4 (K., 163).

light appears to the soul as utter darkness and misery. John uses the analogy of sunlight streaming through a window.[137] The sunlight is unperceivable unless it is reflected upon a denser material, like a speck of dust. The light itself is not darkness, but everything that is not light appears as darkness. In the same way, everything foreign to the divine light appears as darkness within this light.

The self-knowledge proffered by the illumination of the divine ray causes great pain for the soul. "These afflictions," John relates, "pierce the soul when it remembers the evils in which it sees itself immersed."[138] Johns adds, "Because the soul is purified in a forge 'like gold in the crucible' [I Peter 1:7] . . . it feels both this terrible undoing in its very substance and extreme poverty as though it were approaching its end."[139] John concedes, "Sometimes this experience is so vivid that it seems to the soul that it sees hell and perdition open before it."[140] Death, to the soul in this Dark Night, would be a welcome relief.[141] Thirsting for God, but observing their own inner poverty such persons "feel that they truly bear within themselves every reason for being rejected and abhorred by God."[142] The tension is extreme between love of God and abhorrence of self, but there is no other way. John relates, "Since the state of perfection, which consists in perfect love of God and contempt of self, cannot exist without knowledge of God and self, the soul must first be exercised in both."[143]

Nothing can compare to the torture of this self-knowledge or the pain of loving God and at the same time feeling that one's soul has nothing in common with the Beloved. The soul is

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[137] Idem., *Night,* II.8.3-4 (K., 411).
[138] Ibid., II.6.6 (K., 406).
[139] Ibid., (K. 405).
[140] Ibid., (K., 406).
[141] Cf. Ibid., II.5.6 (K., 403).
[142] Ibid., II.7. (K., 409).
[143] Ibid., II.18.4 (K., 439).

suspended, as over an abyss, her natural faculties are annihilated, and she is struck dumb.[144] At Dark Midnight,

> God divests the faculties, affections, and senses, both spiritual and sensory, interior and exterior. He leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings.[145]

The faculties of intellect, will, and memory are made blind. Faith alone serves as guide for the soul towards the Union of Love.[146] The soul is lifted above all things created, and in a certain manner, nothing created remains in the soul; the soul communes with God "spirit to Spirit."[147]

John repeatedly affirms that God humbles and *denudes* (*desnuda*) the soul only to exalt it. He reminds the soul of the maxim, "To descend is to ascend and to ascend is to descend."[148] Despite the extreme purgation that the soul undergoes in this Dark Night of the Spirit, the soul also gains many benefits. Perhaps the greatest of these is that the soul learns in this Dark Night to fulfill the first commandment: "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5).[149] Among other benefits are: security from the attack of pride,[150] a knowledge that embraces all things,[151] tears,[152] and detachment.[153]

In comparison to the Night of the Senses, the degree of passivity in the Night of the Spirit is much more pronounced. The goal, in fact, is to become a passive vessel, completely

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[144] Cf. Idem., *Ascent* II.4.1 (K., 159) on the "abyss of faith."
[145] Idem., *Night,* II.3.3 (K.399).
[146] Cf. Ibid., II.2.5 (K., 398).
[147] Ibid., II.17.4
[148] Ibid., II.18.2
[149] Cf. Ibid., II.11.2
[150] Ibid., II.16.3
[151] Ibid., II.8.5. John explains that such knowledge is not particular but general (i.e. Aristotelian Universals).
[152] Ibid., II.9.7
[153] Ibid., II.8.1; II.8.2; II.9.5; II.24.3

emptied of the self that God may transform the soul into God.[154] Yet, as in the first Night, John does proscribe a certain degree of activity in the second Night. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel,* John focuses on the suspension and even *annihilation* (*aniquilación*) of the faculties of intellect, will, and memory by means of faith. However, the extent in which this faith is something that the soul is meant to actively acquire and the degree that this faith is *infused* (*infusa*) remains unclear in John's writings.[155] In the *Dark Night*, John proposes a method of ascent through the image of a ladder comprised of ten steps.[156] The image is not original with John. He attributes it to St. Bernard and St. Thomas, though it is now known to be an apocryphal work of a 13th or 14th century Dominican monk, Helviticus Teutonicus. Whereas, in the original (*On the Ten Degrees of Love*) the author presents a method by which the soul can actively ascend to Beatific Vision, in John's treatment each step is decidedly passive in nature. The first step, for example, "makes the soul sick in an advantageous way;" the second "causes a person to search for God unceasingly."[157] On each step, God allows or actively *does* something *to* the soul. Therefore, similar to the Night of the Senses, the greatest activity remains patience, perseverance, and passivity.

The ninth step of John's "ladder" brings the soul to the long desired Union of Love of which the Dark Night was merely a preparation. Even in the latter stages of the Dark Night the flame that was once painful is experienced as a gentle warmth. Now, as the soul enters the rank of the Perfect "the Holy Spirit produces this gentle and delightful ardor by reason of the perfect

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[154] Cf. Idem., *Ascent,* II.5.3 "Transformed into God by love" ("*trasformada en Dios por amor*").
[155] For further study see, Pope John Paul II, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross,* translated by Jordan Aumann. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981.
[156] John, *Night,* II.19-20 (K., 440-445). Cf. K., 440, n.1.
[157] Ibid., II.19.1,2 (K., 440, 441).

soul's union with God."[158] In *The Living Flame of Love,* John clearly identifies the "living flame" with the Holy Spirit. He writes, "This flame of love is the Spirit of the Bridegroom, who is the Holy Spirit."[159] Moreover, the Holy Spirit is not only the Agent of Union, but also its very substance. In *The Spiritual Canticle,* John relates,

> By His divine breath-like spiration (*aspiración*), the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit Himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to Himself.[160]

If one takes into account John's reverence of Augustine (354-430) displayed throughout his works,[161] the close association that he holds between the Union of Love and the presence of the Holy Spirit is a logical development within his writing. According to Augustine, within the Trinity Itself the Holy Spirit serves as the love that unites the Father and the Son. In his *De Trinitate,* Augustine writes, "Therefore the Holy Spirit is a certain unutterable communion of the Father and the Son."[162] The Holy Spirit *is* that Union of Love that the Father gives to the Son; the Holy Spirit *is* that Union of Love that the Son returns to the Father, and potentially to those emerging from the Dark Night and entering the realm of the Perfect. Augustine makes this admission perfectly clear in the last book of *De Triniate* where he relates, "And the Holy Spirit, according to the Holy Scriptures, is neither of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but of both;

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[158] Ibid., II.20.4 (K., 444).
[159] Idem., *Living Flame,* I.3.
[160] Idem., *The Spiritual Canticle,* 39.3 (K., 622-623).
[161] John solicits the authority of Augustine four times, once in *Ascent* I.5.1 and three times in *Spiritual Canticle,* I.6, IV.1, and V.1. each time from *Soliloquiorum animae ad Deum* 1.30 (PL 40. 888), now held by scholars to be a 14th century apocryphal work. See G. Esnos, "Les traductions médiévales françaises et italiennes des Soliloques attribués à Saint Augustin," in Ecole française de Rome. Mélanges d'archéologie et d'Histoire 79 (1967), pp. 299-366) Thomas Aquinas, to whom John of the Cross was undoubtedly indebted, relies heavily on the Trinitarian teachings of Augustine. Thus, regardless of the authenticity of the text John of the Cross quotes directly, his reliance upon Augustinian thought, through the transmission of Aquinas appears to be nonetheless, strong.
[162] Augustine, *De Trinitate,* V.12 "Ergo spiritus sanctus ineffabilis quaedam patris filiique communio."

and so intimates to us a mutual love, wherewith the Father and the Son *reciprocally love one another*."[163]

According to John of the Cross' conception, the Living Flame of the Holy Spirit unites the Christian to that same love and life which exists between the Father and the Son, making the soul divine. John writes, "The union wrought between the two natures and the communication of the divine and the human in this state is such that even though neither changes his being (*su ser*), both appear to be God."[164] John refers to this event as a Spiritual Marriage, describing it as "two natures in one spirit and love." In this Marriage, the soul is *infused* (*infusa*) with all that is God's. John declares, "Her intellect will be the intellect of God, her will then will be God's will, and thus her love will be God's love . . . for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God's."[165] If one bears in mind Augustine's dictum that God is Love,[166] and specifically God, the Holy Spirit, it is clear to see how John can assume that through the Union of Love the soul becomes equal to God.[167]

John is quick to admit that this divinization is only by participation and not by a sharing of substance. Commenting on Christ's prayer to the Father "that they all may be one" (Jn. 17:20-23), John writes, "The Father loves them by communicating to them the same love He communicates to the Son [i.e. the Holy Spirit], though not naturally as to the Son but, as we said, through unity and transformation of love."[168] In *The Living Flame,* John adds, "Although the

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[163] Ibid., XV.27 "Nunc de spiritu sancto quantum deo donante videre conceditur disserendum est. Qui spiritus sanctus secundum scripturas sanctus nec patris est solius nec filii solius sed amborum, et ideo communem qua invicem se diligunt pater et filius caritatem.
[164] John, *The Spiritual Canticle,* 22.4 (K., 561).
[165] Ibid., 38.3 (K., 619).
[166] Augustine, *De Trinitate,* 15.29.
[167] Cf. John, *Spiritual Canticle,* 24.5 (K., 576): "This kiss is the union of which we speak, in which the soul is made equal with God through love."
[168] Ibid., 39.5 (K., 624).

substance of this soul is not the substance of God, since it cannot undergo a substantial conversion into Him, it has become God through participation (*par participación*) in God, being united to and absorbed (*absorta*) in Him."[169] In the teachings of Eastern Church Fathers participation implies man's co-operation with the Holy Spirit in *synergy* (συνεργία), resulting in the interpenetration (περιχώρησις) of God and Man, which in turn promotes man's ever-increasing deification (θέωσις).[170] In the writings of John of the Cross, participation seems to imply something quite different. After the soul has been completely purged of all human desires, will, and intellect, God simply *infuses* His own desire, will, and intellect into her, the soul having become passive and made a completely empty (*nada*) vessel. It is this state of nothingness (*nada*) that is the underlying *raison d'être* for the Dark Night.

In a fundamental chapter of *The Ascent,* John elaborates upon the necessity of the Dark Night for the purpose of complete purification. He writes,

> No creature, none of its actions and abilities, can reach or encompass God's nature. Consequently, a soul must strip itself of everything pertaining to creatures and of its actions and abilities . . . so that when everything unlike and unconformed to God is cast out, it may receive the likeness of God. And the soul will receive this likeness because nothing contrary to the will of God will be left in it. Thus it will be transformed into God.[171]

In other words, the Union of Love can only occur when the soul contains nothing other than that to which she wishes to be joined. John explains, "The supernatural union [of Love] exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the

[169] Idem., *Living Flame,* 2.34 (K., 671).
[170] This point will be elaborated upon in our concluding chapter.
[171] John, *Ascent,* II.5.4 (K., 163).

other."[172] This premise is closely related to the Thomist teaching concerning the Beatific Vision, which John of the Cross undoubtedly reflects.

The tenth step on John's mystical ladder of divine love is the attainment of the Beatific Vision. On this step, which can only be experienced after death, "love assimilates the soul to God completely because of the clear vision of God that a person possesses at once on reaching it."[173] John adds, "This vision is the cause of the soul's complete likeness to God."[174] There is contained in this statement a clear understanding that the vision of God results in the soul's likeness to God, a likeness approaching equality. However, there is also the understanding within John's writing that the vision of God must be predicated by the soul's likeness to God. In this respect, John was a direct inheritor of Aquinas.

Aquinas, expanding upon the teachings of Augustine concerning the Beatific Vision,[175] constructs an argument based upon the Apostle John's words, "We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (I Jn. 3:2). Aquinas understood this as meaning the essence of a thing can only be seen when viewed through the frame of a similar substance. Aquinas writes, "The intellect in act is somewhat one with the intelligible object of the act."[176] In like manner, God's essence, therefore, can only be seen when viewed through a frame completely like God's essence. Aquinas continues, "In the vision wherein God will be seen in His essence, the Divine essence itself will be the form, as it were, of the intellect, by which it will understand."[177] God is thus the "lens" by which the soul sees God. In earthly life, this vision was not of God's essence, but the soul merely

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[172] Ibid.
[173] Idem., *Dark Night,* II.20.5 (K., 445).
[174] Ibid.
[175] Cf. Augustine, *City of God,* XXII.29.
[176] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* Supplementary texts, 92. Reply 1.
[177] Ibid., Objection 8.

received "touches" (*cierto toques*) of the Divine.[178] However, both Aquinas and John of the Cross are equally clear in affirming that once the body has been completely "spiritualized" after death, the perfected soul will see God *as He is,* in His *substance* (*sustancia*).

Working in reverse, one can see necessity of the Dark Night in the teachings of John of the Cross. If the Beatific Vision requires the soul to be completely like God, all things unlike God must be burned away. The Dark Night of the Senses burned away all attachments to sensible things, the Dark Night of the Spirit burned away all vestiges of the human will, intellect, and memory. Admittedly, in John's view the essence of the human person is never completely eradicated (as is the case in the religions of the Far East). John of the Cross speaks of transformation, participation, and union; terms implying the continued integrity of the person's created senses and spirit. However, John also speaks in more severe terms of absorption, annihilation, and the denuding and death of the soul's senses and spirit. In the Union of Love, John contends that a distinction is still maintained between God's essence and the human essence. Nevertheless, the degree to which the human person remains a distinct being, an *other,* appears mitigated to the extreme in John's final vision of the Perfect, once the soul has emerged from the Dark Night and entered the Union of Love.

We will return to this important consideration after reviewing the life and teachings of Elder Sophrony, who possessed many similar insights into spiritual life as John of the Cross but also offers several alternative answers, particularly toward understanding the integrity of the person after they have passed through the Dark Night.

[178] Cf. John, *Ascent*, II.23.1-3.

CHAPTER THREE:

Elder Sophrony:
Historical and Theological Background

> Upon the brink of the abyss,
> And in the raging ocean′s fury,
> Midst angry waves and darkness vague,
> And in the desert whirlwind′s hurry,
>
> All, all that threatens us with death,
> Hides for the mortal in its depth
> An inexplicable enchantment–
> A promise of eternal life![179]

This image, painted by the poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837), can be seen mirrored in the life of Elder Sophrony. His life can be described as one suspended between a vision of death's abyss

[179]Alexander Pushkin, "The Feast in Time of Plague" in *The Poem, Prose and Plays of Alexander Pushkin,* edited and translated by A. Yarmolinsky. The first stanza is notably quoted by Fr. Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944), whom Elder Sophrony was well acquainted, in "Тихие думы" (Quiet Thoughts) Москва, изд-во "Республика," 1996. Elder Sophrony was a great admirer of Pushkin. *Cf.* Sister Gabriela, *Seeking Perfection,* 22.

and an unquenchable thirst for Eternal Life. Elder Sophrony, in a letter to his family, recalls another poem of Pushkin as having enormous influence during his youth:

> No, I'll not wholly die:
> My soul in sacred lay
> Shall outlive my dust
> And escape decay.[180]

From early childhood, he struggled with the question of Eternity.[181] He was unwilling to accept the possibility of a meaningless death, a plunge into the abyss of non-being. However, his life coincided with events that threatened this conviction to the extreme. He was only seventeen when World War One plunged millions of lives into dark oblivion. In his autobiography, Elder Sophrony writes, "It was impossible to come to terms with the fact of vast numbers of lives being brought to a senseless, cruel end. And I might find myself drafted into their ranks, with the object of slaughtering people I did not know."[182] Tormented by this vision he would ask, "Was I eternal, was everyone else, or were we all destined for the black night of non-being?"[183]

Elder Sophrony was born Sergei Simeonovich Sakharov on September 23rd, 1896. Even before his earthly introduction to the world, his soul peered into the abyss of death. During labor his mother, Catherine, was in great danger of dying. The surgeon put a terrible choice before her husband, Sergei, "Either the mother or the child?" Sergei painfully replied, "Save the mother."[184] Thankfully, the surgeon, also named Sergei Simeonovich, was able to save both lives

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[180] Sophrony, *Letters to His Family,* 26.
[181] Cf. Gabriela, *Being: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony,* 13. Sister Gabriela, a spiritual daughter of Elder Sophrony, records that when Sergei was young "He would discuss and speculate with his friends in the earnest manner of young children about where their grandparents and other people who had died would be." Cf. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him as He Is,* 10.
[182] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 10-11.
[183] Ibid., 11.
[184] Sophrony, *Letters,* 23 n20. Recounted by the editor, Arch. Nicholas (Sakharov), grandnephew of Elder Sophrony.

and the grateful father named his newborn son, Sergei in honor of the surgeon.[185] Thus, Sergei Sakharov became the third oldest among a family that eventually numbered ten. His father was a wealthy manufacturer of ladies' handbags and was patronized by the wealthy of Moscow. The Sakharov's large home can still be seen on Moscow's Giliarovskogo Street, a half hour tram ride from the Kremlin.[186] Sergei's father made sure that his children received the best education. Sergei likely received his elementary education at a classical gymnasium where he would have studied Russian and European literature, Latin, Greek, and French, calligraphy, and sacred and secular history.[187] The young Sergei loved literature, especially Pushkin and Turgenev (1818-1883). He also frequently attended the world-renowned Bolshoi Opera where he would listen to the powerful voice of Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938) whom he greatly admired.[188]

Nonetheless, Sergei's greatest passion was for art. From a very early age, he could be often seen sketching under a table in the family's home. Sergei would later write to his family, "For me the world was painting."[189] Judging from his extant works, Sergei undoubtedly received a first-rate elementary education in the classical foundations of artistic technique and form, possibly under the tutelage of Fedor Rerberg (1865-1938) and Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926), both renowned artists, who had *ateliers* near the Sakharov residence.[190] Sergei was just 17 when he was drafted into the Russian army, serving from 1913 to 1917. Much of his service was in the newly formed camouflage division. The atrocities of World War One that surrounded the young

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[185] Ibid., 24.
[186] Cf. Sister Gabriela, *Being,* p. 16 for a picture of the home today.
[187] This is conjecture is proposed by Sister Gabriela, based upon her review of the education of upper class children prior to 1917.
[188] Cf. Gabriela, *Being,* 15. The Bolshoi Opera House from 1899-1914 regularly engaged Feodor Chaliapin where he appeared in several roles, including Boris Godunov and Mephisto. The legendary opera conductor, Arturo Toscanni, observed that Chaliapin was the greatest operatic talent with whom he had ever worked.
[189] Sophrony, *Letters,* 28.
[190] Cf. Gabriela, *Being,* 17.

Sergei, though he was not directly involved in combat, intensified his personal effort to overcome the abyss of non-being yawning all around him and his anxious search for Eternal Being. This search led him to abandon the Christianity of his childhood, which he viewed as existentially limiting.[191] It also led Sergei to the aesthetic idealism of the renowned artist, Vasilii Kandinsky (1866-1944).

In 1910, Kandinsky had produced arguably the first work of art consisting of pure abstraction.[192] In 1912, he published a profound articulation of his aesthetic approach in *Du Spirituel dans l'art* (*On the Spiritual in Art.*) This book was published in Russian in the year 1915 and the young Sergei Sakharov quickly fell under its influence. According to Kandinsky, abstract art contained the possibility to express an object or person's inner meaning, a spiritual reality not limited by the imitation of material models, as was figurative art. In his estimation, abstract art alone could bridge the chasm between the physical and metaphysical, creating a "spiritual atmosphere," either "pure or poisonous" by which an artistic work's value could be judged.[193] Kandinsky further argued, "A creative work is born from an artist in a very mysterious, enigmatic and mystical manner. Liberated from him, it takes on its own independent, spiritual being which also leads a material and concrete life, it is a *being.*"[194] Not only is the result of abstraction the refinement of the artist's own "inner being" or soul, it is also the creation of something outside the creator, something *new,* they—the artist and artwork—become two separate, living *beings*.

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[191] This decision will be explored later in more detail. *Cf.* Hill, p. 57.
[192] Hilma af Klint, *The Ten Biggest,* No 7 (1907) is another contender for the "first" work of abstract art. The subjective nature of art is such that this debate will never be wholly resolved. Nonetheless, it cannot be doubted that Kandinsky was by and large the most influential pioneer of abstract art, especially with the publication of his work *Du Spirituel dans l'art* in 1912.
[193] Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* Translated by M. Salder. New York: Dover, 1977. p. 55.
[194] Kandinsky, *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky,* pp. 98-99, quoted in Gabriela, *Being,* 22.

These ideas were very attractive to the young Sergei who was desperately searching for Being beyond the chasm of earthly, transitory life. Much later he would write, "[Through Kandinsky] I had been attracted to the idea of pure creativity, taking the form of abstract art."[195] From approximately 1916-1919, Sergei undertook the creation of large compositional improvisations after the manner of Kandinsky. In his own words, he endeavored "Not to copy natural phenomena but to produce new pictorial facts."[196] A possible example of Sergei's abstract improvisations can be seen in *Dunes* (early 1920's).[197] During this time and in between his military service he studied with Il'ia Mashkov (1881-1944), best known for his still lifes. The influence of Mashkov can be easily recognized in Sergei's *Still life with bowl of fruit,* (1922).[198] In 1918, the 22 year-old Sergei Sakharov enrolled in the celebrated Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.[199] Here he studied with Pyotr Konchalovsky (1876-1956), receiving a solid education in anatomy, drawing, painting, and composition. He furthermore acquired a deep appreciation for the Old Masters, in particular Veronese (1528-1588) and Rembrandt (1606-1669).[200] Both Konchalovsky and Mashkov were also great admirers of Paul Cézanne (1839-

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[195] Sophrony, *Wisdom,* 13. Elder Sophrony does not explicitly mention Kandinsky, but his close disciple, Sister Gabriela, shares that he did indeed mean Kandinsky.
[196] Ibid.
[197] *Dunes,* Appendix, Plate III. Much later, he would write: "Prayer is creation, the loftiest form of creation"(*Saint Silouan the Athonite*, 131). He had in mind Pure Prayer in which "a man prays from the very depths of his being, without images, with a pure mind standing before God (ibid., 132). Just as he discovered within abstract art the limitation of its reliance upon created forms, he would later dissuade his readers from imaginative, fantastical forms of prayer, understanding this type of prayer to be bound to one's experience of created forms of being and lacked the possibility of entering into communion with Uncreated, Eternal Being.
[198] *Still life,* Appendix, Plate IV.
[199] Sergei's entrance to Russia's most eminent art school came at a time of transition and turmoil. The newly-formed communist government renamed the school: The Free State Art Studios (known as Svomas). In 1920, Svomas was re-organized and re-named once again, this time as Higher State Artistic-technical Workshops (known as VkhUTEMAS).
[200] Cf. Gabriela, *Being,* 31.

1906) and worked in his post-impressionist style. One can discern the influence of both Cézanne and Konchalovsky in Sergei Sakarov's *Self-Portrait* (1918).[201]

Sometime in either 1919 or 1920, Sergei became disenchanted with abstract art. It is difficult to determine the exact cause or date but at some point he became convinced that pure abstraction could not bridge the chasm of non-being, nor answer his yearning for Eternal Being. He would afterwards recall in his book, *Wisdom from Mount Athos*, "I realized that everything that I created was conditioned by what was already in existence. I could not invent a new colour or line . . . An abstract picture is like a string of words, beautiful and sonorous in themselves, perhaps, but never expressing a complete thought."[202] Much later, after his return to the Christ of his childhood, he would write, "An abstract picture represented a disintegration of being, a falling into the void [the abyss], a return from the *non esse (non-being*) from which we had been called by the creative act of God."[203] One possible turning point in his attitude toward abstract art is an excursion that Sergei made in the summer of 1920 with six of his artist friends to Barvikha, a small, picturesque village just outside Moscow.

Led away from the turmoil of the city, the memories of the previous decade's horror began to fade. Around them, the seven young artists found the beauty of Barvikha's idyllic forests and meadows. Victor Lobanov (1885-1970) in his study of Lebedev-Shuisky (1896-1978), one of Sergei's travel companions, writes that the little group "ecstatically painted studies of nature, giving special attention to the representation and structure of trees."[204] Lobanov adds, "To be

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[201] *Self-Portrait,* Appendix, Plate V.
[202] Sophrony, *Wisdom,* 13.
[203] Ibid., 14.
[204] V.M. Lobanov, *Lebedev-Shuisky,* Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1960, p. 10. Lobanov was an artist, art critic and contemporary of Sergei Sakharov. There is every reason to believe that Lobanov was well acquainted with Lebedev-Shuisky, Sergei and his companions.

immersed in the poetry of nature deeply affected the young artists' ability to see, feel and understand its beauty."[205] Sergei appears to reflect this time when he writes, "The whole world, practically every visual scene, became mysterious, uncommonly beautiful, profound."[206] Later, Sergei would use the image of a great tree to describe the relationship between the abyss of suffering and the vision of heavenly glory. Perhaps he was bringing to mind his time at Barvikha. In *His Life is Mine,* he writes, "When we see a centuries-old tree with its branches reaching to the clouds, we know that its roots, deep in the earth, must be powerful enough to support the whole."[207] What is known for certain is that the seven friends returned to Moscow with a renewed energy to escape the abyss of their world's contemporary situation and to find a means of expressing Eternal Being through their art. The result was the formation of the group '*Bytie*' (*Being*).[208]

The group's youthful and energetic members endeavored to return to a more positive approach to painting. Inspired by the example of their teacher, Konchalovsky, who once said to a student, "Put some *being* into it,"[209] each member of 'Bytie' strove to produce art with essence and content, devoid of abstract and constructive designs. On January 1st, 1922, 'Bytie' offered their first exhibition in Moscow. Although it is not known what precise works were displayed, it is certain that Sergei Sakharov participated. Fyodor Bogorodskiy, a fellow art student at the Moscow school, remarked on the materiality and freshness of the landscapes and still lifes

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[205] Ibid.
[206] Sophrony, *Wisdom from Mount Athos,* 14.
[207] Idem., *His Life is Mine,* 85-86.
[208] The founding members of '*Bytie*' were: Leon Mickhailovich Bounatian (later known as Leonardo Benatov)(1899-1972), Sergei Simeonovich Sakharov (1896-1993), and Anatolii Lebedev-Shuiskiy (1896/8-1978), Grigori Aleksandrovich Sretenskiy (1899-1972), Alekandr Alekseevich Taldykin (1896-?), Pavel Petrovich Sokolov-Skalya (1899-1961), Nikolai Pavlovich Razhin (1892-1942). Cf. *Being,* Appendix A, p. 158.
[209] Gabriela, *Being,* 45.

presented. Fyodor also recalls one of 'Bytie's lively members, Pavel Sokolov-Skalia, loudly arguing with an interlocutor: "You understand, we are fed up with abstraction! Life should resound in our canvases! Do you understand! Life!"[210] The first exhibition was hailed a success by critics and was followed by additional exhibitions each year until 1929. On a personal level, Sergei experienced a similar feeling of success: "For brief moments there comes a feeling of triumph, of victory. I have grasped what I was seeking."[211] However, these feelings of elation, like the group 'Bytie' itself, were short-lived. Sergei goes on to write, "The rapture would soon disappear and once more I would be tormented by my failure."[212]

In the summer of 1922, Sergei Sakharov left Russia with his friend, classmate, and fellow 'Bytie' member, Leon Bounatian (later known as Leonardo Benatov).[213] Leon had received a scholarship to study abroad in the great artistic centers of Italy and France. Sergei was assumed to have the same purpose. However, their journey also came at a time of great upheaval in the Russian intellectual and artistic community. Many chose or were forced to leave the country as the new government sought to eliminate any who might oppose its socialist agenda.[214] Whether or not this formed the real underlying reason for Sergei's departure is unknown. It is a fact that neither Sergei nor Leon returned to their Motherland. The two artists first visited Rome, then Berlin, arriving in Paris at the very end of 1922. Sergei found here a studio in which to work near the beautiful park, *La Maison Blanche.* From the evidence gleaned from his autobiography, it is

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[210] F. Bogorodskiy in V.S. Turchin, *Obrazy bytia, ili iskusstvo sozertsaniia,* Moscow: Libri di Arte, 2008, 47.
[211] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* p. 51.
[212] Ibid.
[213] In 1947, Benatov was still in Paris. Sergei, by then the hieromonk Sophrony, stayed with Benatov after his return from Mount Athos, Greece. Cf. Gabriela, *Seeking Perfection*, 111.
[214] A forced exportation of more than 160 intellectuals occurred in November and December of 1922. Two ships, the *Oberbürgermeister Haken* and the *Preussen,* took these from Petrograd to Stettia in Germany (now Poland) and were later nicknamed "The Philosopher's Ships." Among those exiled were Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944), Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), and Nikolai Lossky (1870-1965). See Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin's Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer and the Exile of the Intelligentsia*, St Martin's Press, 2007.

clear that Sergei continued to be torn between his vision of the dark abyss and his thirst for Eternal Being. In Russia, this struggle had formed the impetus for his participation in 'Bytie.' In Paris, Sergei writes, "I did not pursue anything on this earth except the Eternal, and at the same time in my painting [I] sought to express the beauty proper to almost every manifestation of nature."[215]

Outwardly, Sergei appeared as any other young man, full of life and energy, "often laughing and behaving like everyone else."[216] Paris quickly recognized Sergei's talent. The elite *Salon d'Automne* accepted three of his works in the autumn of 1923.[217] The renowned salon critic Thiebault-Sisson commented in the major newspaper, *Le Temps,* "Sakharof has two small paintings where the care of resemblance does not exclude a softness and delicacy worthy of Ricard."[218] Simply to receive a mention by Theibault-Sisson is evidence of Sergei's exceptional talent, especially when taken with the fact that more than 1,500 artists participated at the 1923 exhibition and very few received reviews. In 1924, Sergei was invited to display at the *Salon des Tuileries*, an honor given only to Paris' most elite artists. Sergei seemed on the cusp of world fame, but internally, he reveals, "I was moving over a bottomless abyss."[219]

In his spiritual autobiography, *We Shall See Him As He Is,* Elder Sophrony vividly recalls an episode from this time:

> I am reading, sitting at the table. I take my head in my hands, and suddenly I feel that I am holding a skull, which I ponder, as it were, from the outside. (Physically, I was young and normally healthy.) Puzzled as to the nature of what was happening to me, I tried to

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[215] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 57.
[216] Ibid., 11.
[217] *Portrait of a woman*, *Portrait of a man,* and a third unknown work. Cf. Gabriela, *Seeking Perfection,* 92.
[218] *Le Temps,* 31st October 1923. Translated by Sister Gabriela, *Seeking Perfection,* 93. Louis-Gustave Ricard, whom Thiebault-Sisson compares to Sergei's work was a French painter (1823-1873), who is best known for his portraits and as being a forerunner of Symbolism. François Thiébault-Sisson, Parisian Salon critic, lived from 1856-1936.
[219] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 12.

> rid myself of the sensations that were interrupting the peaceful progress of my work. Quietly I told myself: I still have a whole lifetime before me—forty or more years full of energy . . . And what happened? Suddenly there came the instinctive, involuntary reply, 'And suppose you have a thousand years—what then?' And the thousand years were over before I could frame the idea in words.[220]

The pursuit of the Eternal through art, to which Sergei had dedicated every fiber of his being, appeared to him as futile. He writes, "A barrier rose up in front of me which felt like a solid wall, heavy as lead. Not one ray of light—mental light, not physical—could pierce this wall which was not a material one."[221] He continues, "In my art I tried to sense, beyond visible reality, the invisible, timeless essence . . . however the hour came when the increasing mindfulness of death entered into outright conflict with my passion for painting."[222] Sergei confesses that the struggle was neither easy nor brief. Nonetheless, "All this travail was in vain: the disparity was too obvious, and in the end *prayer* won."[223]

It should be noted at this point that Sergei had grown up in an observant Orthodox Christian home. He notes especially the influence of his nanny, Catherine, on his spiritual formation, recalling how he would contentedly sit at her feet during the Church services and could easily pray for half an hour or more; "It was like a *need*," he recalls.[224] The extent of his childhood experience of God strikes one with awe. He writes, "There were occasions when coming out of church I would see the city, then the whole world for me, lit by two kinds of light. Sunlight could not eclipse the presence of another Light."[225] As extraordinary as this account is, it would appear that the young Sergei was granted the grace of seeing the Uncreated Light. However, receiving such enormous grace Sergei was a special target of intrusive thoughts. One

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[220] Ibid., 16.
[221] Ibid., 12.
[222] Ibid., 15.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Idem., *Letters,* 24.
[225] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 37.

such thought came to him when he was 17, walking along Moscow's Milutin Lane. He describes his internal dialogue thus:

> 'So, you pray?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'And your thoughts are always turned to some kind of immortality?'
> 'Yes.'
> 'But then what does the Gospel say? "Love God and your neighbor!'
> The thought flashed by in an instant, but it had presented me with a picture of something that was greater than what the Gospel speaks of.[226]

Sergei perceived the commandment of Christ as a shallow psychological appeal to emotion. The thought was so paralyzing that he dismissed the deity of Christ and forced himself to cease addressing Him in prayer. Sergei was instead drawn to the idea of Supra-Personal Being promoted in the religions of the Far East. This was also the period that Sergei came under the influence of Kandinsky, who, although an Orthodox Christian, was nevertheless attracted to the philosophies of non-Christian religions.

Sergei arrived in Paris a non-believer, practicing *yoga* and meditation, and spending long hours alone in his studio lost in his artistic pursuit. However, at the same time, he writes, "Prayer began again in me, and this prayer came with such force that I could no longer give myself wholeheartedly to painting."[227] From his arrival in 1922 to 1925, Sergei was torn between these two aspirations: art and prayer. The battle so absorbed him that he records, "Sometimes, in the street, I would not be aware of the surrounding world . . . I did not feel that I was insane, but how others saw I don't know."[228] Sergei continued to be tormented by increasing mindfulness of the futility of earthly pursuits and was seized by a desperate prayer to the God of his youth. In his autobiography, one catches a glimpse into his state at the time: "As I prayed, I would feel fire

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[226] *Op. cit.,* 27.
[227] Ibid., 30.
[228] Ibid., 31.

burning up everything. I do not know how I survived. I shall never be able to find words for that fire which I experienced, and the despair."[229] Later, he adds, "Darkness stood before like a solid wall separating me from God."[230] This struggle reached its apogee on the night of Holy Saturday, 1925.[231]

In a letter to David Balfour (1903-1989), written a decade later, Sergei recalls this life-changing experience as though speaking of another:

> I know a man in Paris, who from Holy Saturday until the third day of Easter, throughout the three days, was in a state of contemplation, something which in the form of our earthly being he could express only by saying that he 'beheld the dawn of day without eventide. 'The dawn', because the light was unusually delicate, fine, 'tender', in some way sky blue in colour. 'The day without eventide' is eternity.[232]

Many decades later, in his autobiography, he would make clear that he spoke of himself. He writes, "Gentle, full of peace and love, the Light remained with me three days. It drove away the darkness of non-existence that had engulfed me."[233] What Sergei had so long sought for in his art, he experienced in the Light of *The* Eternal Being, the Personal God, the I AM. He continues, "Tormented hitherto by the spectre of universal death, I now felt that my soul too was resurrected and there were no more dead . . . If this is God, then let me quickly abandon everything."[234]

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[229] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 33.
[230] Ibid., 35.
[231] There exists a disagreement among Elder Sophrony's biographers regarding the date of Sergei's Easter (Paschal) experience. Elder Sophrony mentions 1924 being the **possible** date in *We Shall See Him,* p. 178 and Arch. Nicholai accepts this suggestion in *I Love Therefore I Am,* p. 19. However, Sister Gabriella (*cf.* '*Being*,' p. 85) mentions 1925 as the date of Sergei's Easter experience and this date is more compatible with his abandonment of painting and entrance into the St. Sergius Institute the summer of the same year. In his *Letters to His Family,* Elder Sophrony also mentions two-and-a-half years passing between his arrival in Paris and the event. If he arrived at the end of 1922, this would also be indicative of 1925 and not 1924 for the date for his Paschal vision. However, the exact chronology is of little consequence in comparison to the miracle of the actual event.
[232] Sophrony, Letter 22, *Striving for Knowledge of God,* 234.
[233] Idem., *We Shall See Him As He Is,* 178.
[234] Ibid.

Sergei did indeed abandon everything. He set aside his art and immediately enrolled in the *Saint Serge Institut de Theologie Orthodoxe* (St. Sergius Institute), which had been formed in Paris that same year. Metropolitan Eulogy Gueorguievsky (1868-1946) had brought together the most eminent Orthodox theologians and philosophers of the time to form the Institute. A large majority of these had been recently exiled from Russia. Among these were Sergei Bulgakov (1871-1944) and Georges Fedotov (1886-1951). Bulgakov was made head of the Institute and taught dogmatics. He also served as Sergei's father-confessor.[235] His influence on the future Elder Sophrony has been emphasized by contemporary theologians: Fr. Nicholas Sakharov and Fr. Andrew Louth.[236] Yet, while Elder Sophrony's later dogmatic writings do betray many elements common to Bulgakov's thought, it is difficult to believe that Bulgakov could have exerted so much influence in such a short space of time.

It is quite unlikely that Sergei could have come into contact with Fr. Bulgakov any earlier than April of 1925 and he left Paris for Mount Athos in autumn of 1925.[237] Sergei thus attended the Institute no more than five months. Elder Sophrony gives the reason for his departure in a letter written to his family in 1975. He writes,

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[235] Fr. Sergei Bulgakov, as Sergei's father-confessor, did not act in the capacity of a spiritual father but only heard his confessions and may have offered advice. Sergei was therefore not in a position of monastic obedience or discipleship to Fr. Bulgakov, as he would have been if Fr. Bulgakov had been his spiritual father.

[236] Fr. Nicholas (Sakharov), in *I Love Therefore I Am,* writes, "The most profound influence on Fr Sophrony in the field of dogmatic theology came from Fr. Sergius Bulgakov," p. 20. However, in a recent conversation (Feb. 24th, 2017) with Hieromonk Nicholas, he indicated that this statement should only be understood as indicating Elder Sophrony's *adaption* of the **language** of Bulgakov and not a *dependence* upon him for his dogmatic vision. Fr. Nicholas reaffirmed the originality of Elder Sophrony's thought. He agreed that his theological vision was the fruit of his personal experience and his encounter with St. Silouan and not the shadow cast by Bulgakov. It should also be known that Bulgakov's first major dogmatic work, Агнец Божий (Lamb of God) was not published until 1933 (Paris: YMCA) and it is quite unlikely that Fr. Sophrony would have read this work until after his return to France in 1947. This fact further removes the possibility that Sergei could have been significantly influenced by Bulgakov's work.

[237] The St. Sergius Institute did not open its doors until April of 1925. Cf. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance,* Oxford: 2014, p. 128. Elder Sophrony provides August 1925 as the date of his arrival at Mount Athos in *Letters,* 33.

> And I, not without pain, decided to go to the Theological Institute, so as to get more acquainted with the Christian world view, with the Christian outlook, with Christian teaching. During my time there I did not find what I was looking for: I learned some names, dates, who said what. I got to know about the historical difficulties of the Church, and so forth—but I had wanted only to hear about how to attain to eternity.[238]

Sergei was evidently still consumed with his life-long pursuit of Eternal Being even after his Easter experience. The only benefit that the Institute afforded was that he was given a small room above the professors' offices in which he could devote himself to prayer.[239] He writes, "My constant prayer like some volcanic eruption proceeded from the profound despair that had taken over my heart."[240] He had been swept up into Eternal Life in his experience of the Uncreated Light but this state was short-lived. In his autobiography, he explains, "No effort on our part can retain this delicate Spirit. It departs and once again we are plunged in the darkness of death."[241] Having tasted what he had for so long sought, he was once again left bereft of His Presence; and this was a hell most bitter. In this hell, the intellectual information offered at St. Sergius held no attraction for him. He had the feeling that he must go to a monastery, if need be, to die in his wrestling with God.[242]

In this state, he travelled to Yugoslavia and from there came to the Holy Mountain in the fall of 1925.[243] He was accepted into the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon and in this place

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[238] Sophrony, *Letters,* 33.
[239] Cf. Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 40.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 44.
[242] Hieromonk Nicholas, in a recent lecture (Feb. 24th, 2017), noted the following: In Sergei's wish to enter a monastery he differed with his father-confessor, Fr. Bulgakov, who was rather dismissive of monasticism in general and of Sergei's desire in particular. Later, Fr. Sophrony would send his disciples to the Universities of Oxford, Athens, and even the St Sergius Institute to acquire advanced degrees in theology. This proves that he was not against intellectual acquisition, *per se,* but only intellectual pursuit in isolation from spiritual life. He emphasized the necessity for a personal encounter with God before studying theology.
[243] Mt. Athos or the Holy Mountain is a republic of monks on a peninsula on the northeast coast of Greece. Monasticism was officially established on the peninsula in 885 by a *chrysobull* of the Emperor Basil I. The Great Lavra, the largest monastery on Mount Athos was established by St. Athanasios of Athos in 963. It

gave himself wholly to his fiery repentance. He describes the extreme tension that he witnessed during this period, lasting nearly five years, when he writes, "The soul is torn in two—torn between the horror of seeing oneself as one is and the surge of hitherto unknown strength through beholding the Living God. In a curious fashion despair over myself prevailed to such an extant that even when He was with me and in me I could not stop weeping for my sin."[244] In 1927, Sergei was tonsured a monk, receiving the name, Sophrony. On May 13th, 1930 he was ordained a deacon by His Grace, Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (1881-1956).[245] A short while after his ordination, a fellow monk, Fr. Vladimir, came to Fr. Sophrony and asked him, "How can a man be saved?"[246] Fr. Sophrony replied, "Stay at the edge of the abyss, and when it gets too much, step back from the edge and take a cup of tea."[247] Then he handed the monk a cup of tea. The next day Fr. Sophrony encountered the schema-monk Silouan (1866-1938) as he was coming up from the monastery's harbor.[248] It was a *meeting*, a "monumental event of determinative importance to [Elder Sophony's] later spiritual development and theology."[249]

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has remained, since that time, the heartbeat of Orthodox monasticism and Orthodox Christianity as a whole.

[244] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 28-29.

[245] Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović was canonized by the Serbian Church in 2003. Bishop Nikolaj was consecrated in 1920 and served as the bishop of Ohrid and Žiča until his death in 1956. He was a renowned scholar and speaker, possessed doctoral degrees from the University of Berne and Oxford, and suffered in the Dachau concentration camp under the Nazi regime. He was a great friend of St. Silouan the Athonite, Elder Sophrony, and other great figures of Orthodoxy in the 20th century such as St. John Maximovitch (+1966). He served as professor at and then rector of St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Seminary from 1951 until his death there on March 18th, 1956.

[246] Sophrony, *Letters,* 35.

[247] Idem., *On Prayer,* 51. On the surface, Elder Sophrony's suggestion (i.e to have a cup of tea) appears whimsical and dismissive. However, considering Boris Bugaev's (pseudonym: Andrei Bely) (1880-1934) comment of 1907, with whose description Sergei was likely familiar, his suggestion is not to be taken as arbitrary. Bugaev writes, "The abyss is a must for the St. Petersburg writer . . . They go fall in love above the abyss, the visit each other above the abyss, make their careers above the abyss, and place the samovar [the quintessential Russian tea pot] above the abyss," in Gabriela, *Being,* 65.

[248] The schema-monk Silouan was proclaimed a saint in 1987 by the Ecumenical Patriarch, DEMITRIOS I (1972-1991).

[249] Arch. Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart,* 21. Archimandrite Zacharias was a disciple of Elder Sophrony and one of his closest confidants. He now serves as one of the elders at monastery Fr. Sophrony

Fr. Silouan had arrived at the monastery of St. Panteleimon in 1892. Through the prayers of St. John of Kronstadt, he had come to the monastery consumed with a fiery repentance and zeal to find salvation.[250] However, after a short time he lost this grace and found that he continued to be tormented by "seductive images" and thoughts that whispered to him, "return to the world."[251] He struggled thus for six months until he "reached the final stages of desperation."[252] Elder Sophrony relates, "Sitting in his cell before vespers, he thought, 'God will not hear me!' He felt utterly forsaken, his soul plunged in the darkness of despondency."[253] It was at this darkest hour that he entered a little chapel and encountered the Living Christ in the place of His icon. The vision completely transformed the young novice.[254]

Nevertheless, after relating the vision to his father-confessor, who did not hide his amazement, Fr. Silouan was beset by proud thoughts and for fifteen more years he was the victim of terrible demonic assaults. One night as he was sitting on a stool, striving to pray with a pure mind, his cell was once more filled with demonic spirits. In his heart he begged God, " 'What must I do to stop them hindering me?' And in his soul he heard, 'The proud always suffer from devils.' 'Lord,' said Silouan, 'teach me what must I do that my soul may become humble.' "[255]

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later founded in Essex, England and has written and lectured extensively on the life and theology of his elder, Sophrony.

[250] The young Silouan (then Simeon) at the conclusion of his military service (just prior to 1892) went to ask the famed priest, St. John of Kronstadt (1829-1909) for his blessing to become a monk. As St. John was away, Silouan left him a note with the following words, "*Batioushka* [*Father*], I want to become a monk. Pray that the world does not hold me back" (*Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 19). St. Silouan attested to the power of St. John's prayers, telling Elder Sophrony, "The very next day he began to feel, 'the flames of hell roaring' around him" (Ibid.).

[251] Sophrony, *St Silouan the Athonite,* 12.

[252] Ibid.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Two gifts in particular would define Fr. Silouan for the rest of his life: The vision of Christ's humility and the gift of prayer for the whole world.

[255] *Op cit.,* 42.

Then, the Lord replied, "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not."[256] This word of the Lord revealed to Silouan the path by which to cross the abyss. "I began to do as the Lord told me," writes Silouan, "and the Spirit witnessed to my salvation."[257] Silouan thus attained that Peace that passes understanding and for the rest of his earthly life he prayed to God with a pure mind that, "all may come to know Thy love and in the Holy Spirit behold Thy gentle countenance."[258]

Fr. Sophrony was already acquainted with Silouan through Bishop Nikolaj. However, he felt ashamed in his presence because he sensed that Silouan knew his terrible state. Seeing Silouan coming up the hill toward him, Fr. Sophrony tried to avoid meeting him. However, Silouan desired to speak to the bashful young deacon regarding his advice to Fr. Vladimir and changed his course to make their meeting inevitable. Silouan promptly asked, "Did Fr. Vladimir visit you yesterday?"[259] Bypassing all polite forms of address, Fr. Sophrony immediately asked, "Did I make a mistake?"[260] Fr. Silouan replied, "No, you were right, but it is beyond his strength."[261] Fr. Silouan discerned the similarity of their experience and invited Fr. Sophrony to his cell. Here, Silouan revealed Christ's word to him: "Keep thy mind in hell and despair not" so akin to Fr. Sophrony's advice to "stay at the edge of the abyss." Based on their common experience, Fr. Silouan taught Fr. Sophrony the *great science* of judging oneself as worthy of hell-fire while avoiding complete despair.[262] Fr. Sophrony henceforth devoted himself to Fr. Silouan and was his closest disciple until Silouan's repose in 1938.

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[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid., 431.
[258] Ibid., 347.
[259] Sophrony, *Letters,* 35.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid.
[262] St. Silouan speaks of this *great science* in the following words, "In his soul man must condemn himself but not despair of the compassion and love of God. He must acquire a lowly and contrite spirit, and then all intrusive thoughts will depart and his mind will be purified." *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 437-438. We will

Two years after their meeting, Fr. Sophrony became acquainted with David Balfour, an English convert to Orthodoxy, who was visiting St. Panteleimon's for academic research.[263] Balfour stayed on the Holy Mountain for only three months. However, a lively correspondence continued between them that continued throughout Balfour's turbulent and complicated life.[264] In the letters of Fr. Sophrony to Balfour that have been preserved,[265] one can observe the maturity and depth of Fr. Sophrony's thought.[266] They express the central ideas of his later writings: self-emptying, Godforsakenness, pure prayer, and the vision of Christ in the Light of Eternity. The eloquence of his theological discourse and the clarity of his spiritual vision produce

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return to Elder Sophrony's adoption of St. Silouan's teaching regarding love of God to the point of self-hatred in Chapter Four.

[263] Based on his research, Balfour published a thesis of more than 600 pages on St. Symeon of Thessolonica in two volumes: *Politico-historical works of Symeon Archbishop of Thessalonica:* critical Greek text with introduction and commentary, (Wien, 1979); and Ἔργα θεολογικά, Ἁγίου Συμεὼν ἀρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης, (Theological works of St. Symeon, Archbishop of Thessalonika), (Thessaloniki, 1981).

[264] David Balfour (1903-1989) was born in England but raised in the Roman Catholic faith, his parents having converted from the Anglican Church when David was a year old. When David was 19, he entered the Benedictine monastery at Farnborough in Hampshire. Here, he met Dom Louis Gillet (later the revered author, Fr. Lev Gillet). Dom Louis awakened an interest in Balfour about the Christian East. This interest led him to transfer to the Benedictine priory at Amay-sur-Meuse, Belgium that had a special apostolate to engage in Catholic-Orthodox rapprochement. Fr. Lev Gillet entered the Orthodox Church in 1928, but Balfour did not immediately follow his example. In 1932, David journeyed to Mount Athos for the purpose of studying manuscripts. Here, he met Fr. Sophrony and Fr. Silouan. Through their influence, David was received into the Orthodox Church on September 12th, 1932. In 1933, he renewed his monastic vows. However, Fr. David was scandalized by the political intrigues and factions within the Orthodox Church in Europe consequent of the political turmoil in Russia at the time. His letters to Fr. Sophrony reveal his continued struggle to accept the exclusivity of the Orthodox Faith for another decade. From 1936-1941, he served as priest and confessor to the Greek royal family. During this time, he also graduated from the University of Athens with highest honors. The Germans invaded Greece in the spring of 1941 and the British Embassy evacuated Fr. David to Egypt. While in Egypt, Fr. David completely left his priesthood and the Orthodox Church. Because of this sudden departure, he was later accused of working as a British Spy even prior to the German Invasion. After the war, the former monk David turned British intelligence officer and returned to Greece. Then, in 1948 he was married to Louise Fitzherbert. A year later a daughter was born. David worked as a British diplomat for more two decades. It was not until 1962, when David paid a visit to Fr. Sophrony, who by that time was in Essex, England, that he began to once more express interest in returning the Orthodox Church. After confessing to Fr. Sophrony, he was received as a layman on February 25th and became a faithful, devout and active member of the Church until his death on October 11th, 1989. Metropolitan KALLISTOS (Ware) recalls in his *Obituary* for David Balfour the tears that he often saw David shed during the Divine Liturgy (*Sobornost,* new series 12.1 (1990), 52-61.

[265] Recently published in: Elder Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge,* edited and translated by Hieromonk Nicholas (Sakharov). Essex: St. John the Baptist Stravropegic Monastery, 2016.

[266] The published letters span from July 1932 to December 1970. However, most of the letters date from 1932 to 1936, providing ample evidence of Elder Sophrony's early thought.

the impression that here is a man already formed—a theologian of the highest caliber. Judging from the brevity of his formal theological studies, the maturity expressed in his letters can have no other source than his own experience and his own assimilation to St. Silouan's vision.[267]

One letter, written sometime toward the end of 1932, contains an important question in respect to our comparative study of Fr. Sophrony and John of the Cross. Balfour had asked Fr. Sophrony in a letter, now lost, "to express [his] opinion on the book of John of the Cross, to indicate the distortions and deviations in it."[268] To this request, Fr. Sophrony answered, "I am not at all disposed to consider the work of St. John with a preconceived wish to find in him some 'distortions and deviations.'"[269] However, with a wish to help David he promised to read St. John's writings with "fear, prayer and attention."[270] Due to severe illness from which Fr. Sophrony fully expected to die, he did not manage to read and reflect on St. John's writings until 1936, four years later. By this time, David was living in Athens. In his answer, Fr. Sophrony admits that St. John had "struck [him] with the depth of his psychological analysis."[271] "Certain spiritual states," he adds, "are described in his book with astonishing order and completeness."[272] He appraises St John to be "at the level of the greatest writers on Eastern asceticism."[273] Of particular value, in Fr. Sophrony's estimation, is St. John's "resolve to bear

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[267] This observation suggests that Elder Sophrony's formation occurred long before he came into prolonged contact with the "Paris School" theologians. Elder Sophrony *did* spend considerable time in the circle of Vladimir Lossky, Sergei Bulgakov, Leonid Ouspensky and Georges Florovsky from 1946-1964. Doubtless, he was able to refine the language *articulating* his experience through contact with these great figures of 20th century Orthodoxy. However, his letters to David Balfour demonstrate that he is not significantly indebted to any of these theologians for his later writings and teachings.
[268] Sophrony, Letter 12, *Striving for the Knowledge,* 170.
[269] Ibid., 171.
[270] Ibid. Fr. David had sent to Fr. Sophrony: *Abrege de toute la doctrine mystique de S. jean de la Croix*, Editions de la Vie Spirituelle (1925). This publication contained an abridgement of St. John's texts in French and English.
[271] Ibid., 247.
[272] Ibid., 247. The letter is dated May, 17th-18th, 1936.
[273] Ibid.

with gratitude the inevitable afflictions and difficulties of our path."[274] Beyond this general commendation, Fr. Sophrony refrains from offering any analysis of St. John's writings in light of Orthodox dogma and ascetic practice. The precarious state of his health and his continued pained repentance prevented him from being "drawn to such questions."[275]

Despite his reserved appreciation for the writings of John of the Cross, Fr. Sophrony never recommended it to his disciples. He even remarked to Balfour, "I am sorry that this book [by John of the Cross] fell into your hands."[276] Instead, Fr. Sophrony recommended that Balfour immerse himself in the literature of the Christian East: *The Philokalia, The Homilies* of St. Issac of Syria (6th c.), the writings of St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022), Peter of Damascus (12th c.), St. Paissy Velitchkovsky (1722-1794), St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807-1867), and the *Way of a Pilgrim* (anon. 19th c.).[277] Furthermore, Fr. Sophrony himself shows a comfortable familiarity with all of these authors, often quoting from these texts in his letters.[278] His later writings demonstrate an unmistakable intimacy with the entire Patristic *corpus,* not only in their frequent use of Patristic texts, but in their Patristic *orientation* and Patristic *phronema* (ethos or spirit). It is based on these sources that Fr. Sophrony articulated his experience of the purifying fire of Divine Light and Godforsakenness. That he did not read St. John's *Dark Night* until 1936

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[274] Ibid., 247. Cf. "His inspired book really motivates the soul to proceed resolutely with patience by means of a waterless and cloudy desert towards the Promised Land," ibid, 258.

[275] Ibid., 259. Cf. On February 23rd, 1935, Fr. Sophrony wrote to Balfour, "If death strikes me suddenly, which is very likely . . ." He speaks of this illness (though in the third person) in his book, *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 125-126. According to Arch Zacharias, he was deathly ill with Malaria. Cf. *Man, The Target of God,* 37.

[276] This remark was not included in the final letter sent to Balfour and he adds, "In saying this I do not blame the book itself," ibid., 307.

[277] Cf. Letter 13. *Striving for Knowledge,* pp. 178-179.

[278] Note: St. Panteleimon's Monastery, according to Fr. Sophrony, "has a splendid library of over 20,000 volumes, which include not a few ancient Greek and Slavonic manuscripts." It is evident that he took advantage of this large collection to read the Fathers in their original languages. Fr. Sophrony, besides knowing Russian and some French, was also given the obedience of learning Attic Greek while a novice at St. Panteleimon's. Cf. Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 52-53.

would seem to negate any possibility that this source was at all influential in the development of his thought and expression.[279]

Fr. Sophrony would instead ascribe his later teachings on Godforsakenness to the instruction and example of his beloved elder, Fr. Silouan. In *We Shall See Him as He Is,* Fr. Sophrony marvels,

> Great was the spiritual genius of Blessed St. Silouan to whose feet the Divine Providence led me. He spoke and wrote of his experience in words that were simple, yet intelligible only to those who lived in the same atmosphere as he did . . . The fact that by his, St. Silouan's prayers I, too, was placed in the same spiritual perspective allows me to venture on this task . . . to discuss this vastly important matter . . . '*God cannot be moved by entreaty.*'[280]

The blessed elder Silouan came to an end of his earthly life on September 24th, 1938 and with his demise Fr. Sophrony lost sight of "the one soul free of all passion whom it has been given me to encounter on my earthly way."[281] Shortly thereafter, Fr. Sophrony requested permission to retire to a remote cave in the austere Karoulia region of Mount Athos. In 1941, he was ordained a priest and later became confessor to three monasteries.[282] In order to be more accessible to the many monks who came to him to confess, Fr. Sophrony moved to the cave of the Holy Trinity near St. Paul's monastery in 1944.[283] He remained there until his departure from Mount Athos in 1947.

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[279] Arch. Nicholas remarks, "Fr. Sophrony's ideas on kenosis and Godforsakenness must have taken shape before he read John of the Cross," p. 182. Nicholas Sakharov mentions 1943 as being the first time that Fr. Sophrony read the *Dark Night* in its entirety. Fr. Sophrony's Letter 24 of May 17-18th, 1936 seems to point to this earlier date. Regardless of this discrepancy, it is clear that Fr. Sophrony was already quite formed by his experience and relationship to St. Silouan before his encounter with the Spanish mystic. Arch. Nicholas provides an extensive summary of the Patristic sources on Godforsakenness from which Fr. Sophrony clearly drew, cf. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I Am,* pp. 187-197.
[280] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him As He Is,* 133-134.
[281] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 4.
[282] Hierodeacon Sophrony was ordained a priest at the Monastery of St. Paul on February 15th, 1941 and thereafter became confessor to the monasteries of Simonopetra, Gregoriou, and Xenophontos. Cf. Arch. Zacharias, *Man, The Target of God,* 41.
[283] *Cave of the Holy Trinity,* Monastery of St. Paul, Appendix, Plate VII.

The remoteness of his abode gave Fr. Sophrony the opportunity to give himself over wholly to prayer for a world ripped apart by the events of World War Two. A glimpse of his prayer may be gleaned from the following description:

> "In the solitude of my grotto I had the unique privilege of being able to devote myself entirely to this prayer, free from earthly cares. It possessed me for months on end . . . I would be oblivious to all else, conscious only of a terrible sense of sin which engendered in me sorrow, shame, abhorrence and even hatred of myself. And once more I would drown in tears and repentance, and my spirit would enter a nameless infinity."

Literally suspended above an abyss—his little hut clinging to the sheer face of the cliff on which it was built—the elder prayed, crucified on the "boundary between being and non-being, standing between the paradise of God's love and the hell of Godforsakenness."[284]

Fr. Sophrony left Mount Athos in 1947 and journeyed to Paris in order to fulfill the wish of his elder, Fr. Silouan, that he collect and publish his writings. In Paris, there was still a large Russian Orthodox community in which Fr. Sophrony could find help in these efforts. He had every intention to return to Mount Athos once this work was complete. However, God saw otherwise. In 1948, he succeeded in self-publishing a roneo-typed collection of the writings of Elder Silouan.[285] However, the work so exhausted Fr. Sophrony that he developed a severe stomach ulcer. In the same year, he underwent a complete gastrectomy (removal of the stomach) and spent eighty days in the hospital. Afterward, he was removed to a Russian home for the elderly and later to an old castle tower called *le Donkon,* both in St. Geneviève-des-Bois, a Paris suburb.[286] Laypeople soon began to come to Fr. Sophrony and a small pseudo-monastic community was formed around him. So it was that Fr. Sophrony stayed in France until 1959, never permanently returning to Mount Athos.

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[284] Sophrony, Letter 22, *Striving,* 232.
[285] A manuscript of this work can be found at the St. Tikhon of Moscow Library, South Canaan, PA. For the first page of the work see Appendix, Plate VIII.
[286] Cf. Arch. Zacharias, *Man, The Target of God,* 44.

During his sojourn in France, Fr. Sophrony was given the opportunity to form relationships with many eminent Orthodox theologians, including: Vladimir Lossky and Fr. Georges Florovsky.[287] Fr. Sophrony worked closely with Vladimir Lossky from 1950 to 1957 as the editor of *Messager de l'Exarchate du Patriarche Russe en Europe Occidentale* (*The Russian Messenger*).[288] However, Lossky was skeptical of the dogmatic value of Elder Silouan's writings, prompting Fr. Sophrony to write an extensive introduction demonstrating the theological depth of his elder's thought. Lossky also viewed the Dionysian *via negativa* as the wellspring Orthodox dogma and hesychastic life.[289] Fr. Sophrony, argued, by contrast, "the 'inner quiet' of hesychastic prayer is something different, and is reached by another, different path from what we find in St Dionysius the Areopagite."[290] Lossky moreover viewed "Godforsakenness" as a wholly Western phenomenon, foreign to the experience of the Orthodox Church and viewed with distrust Silouan's experience of God's abandonment.[291]

Fr. Georges Florovsky, by contrast, had a great appreciation for both Elder Silouan's experience and his writings. Fr. Sophrony asked Fr. Georges to provide the Forward to the 1958 English edition of Silouan's writings, *The Undistorted Image,* which he did in glowing terms. Fr. Sophrony had first held correspondence with Fr. Florovsky between the years of 1926-1929.[292] It

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[287] It must also be mentioned that Fr. Sophrony became closely acquainted with two of the greatest iconographers of the 20th century: Leonid Ouspensky (1902-1987) and Fr. Gregory (Krug) (1908-1969). Both these iconographers provided Fr. Sophrony several icons at his request, Ouspensky writing the first icon of Saint Silouan and Fr. Gregory supplying the icons for his chapel at St. Geneviève-des-Bois.

[288] Fr. Sophrony published several important articles in this journal including, "Unity of the Church" in 1950 and "Principles of Orthodox Asceticism" in 1952.

[289] Cf. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* 23-43.

[290] Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge,* 310. Cf. *Saint Silouan,* 139 "The Areopagites took a different route. They gave priority to cogitation, not prayer. Those who set out on that track are often misled. Assimilating without difficulty intellectually even apophatic forms of theology, they content themselves with the intellectual delights experienced."

[291] Cf. Lossky, 225-227.

[292] According to Arch. Nicholas, this correspondence is not extant. In 1924, Bulgakov approached Georges Florovsky with a request that he take the Patristics chair at the St. Sergius Institute in Paris. Florovsky was

is not known why this correspondence ceased. Nonetheless, it was resumed in 1954 and continued until 1963. Fr. Sophrony held Fr. Georges in such high esteem that he asked him to review his book on Elder Silouan and to point out any dogmatic deviations or errors in the text.[293] In addition, he discussed with Fr. Georges Christ's descent into hell, the self-emptying (κενόω) of the incarnate *Logos,* and offered criticism of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov's German idealism.[294] The correspondence demonstrates the ease in which Fr. Sophrony dialogued with one of the greatest Orthodox theologians of the 20th century over matters of the deepest dogmatic significance. This is the more remarkable when one takes into consideration that Fr. Sophrony never completed any formal theological training.[295] His school was experience, his teachers: the Holy Spirit and the unlettered schema-monk, Silouan.

In 1959, Fr. Sophrony, together with a small number of the community that had formed in St. Geneviève-des-Bois, moved to Tolleshunt Knights, near the town of Maldon, Essex: England. Here, Fr. Sophrony established the monastery of St. John the Baptist. The community was mixed, consisting of both men and women monastics. Several nationalities and languages were also represented. Fr. Sophrony took advantage of this diversity to realize his vision of monasticism as a vocation of universal dimensions: The monk is he or she who struggles to discover and enlarge their deep heart, to discover therein God and neighbor and to embrace both

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initially reluctant to accept. However, after deliberating for a year and a half, he relented and came to Paris in September of 1926. Thus, Fr. Sophrony would not have come into personal contact with Florovsky until after his return to Paris in 1947. Cf. *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance*, pp. 129-130.

[293] Софроний, Переписка с протоиереем Георгием Флоровским, Письмо 6 ("Letter 6"), 43-45.

[294] Cf. ibid., Письмо 8 и 9 (Letters 8 and 9), 54-65.

[295] When Fr. Sophrony returned to Paris in 1947, he sought re-entry into the St. Sergius Institute but was rejected, apparently due to his close affiliation with the Moscow Patriarchate, with whom the St. Sergius Institute had broken ties. Cf. Arch. Nicholas, *I Love Therefore I Am,* 29-30.

in pure prayer. The monk is a universal person, defined by neither nationality nor language, but only by their life in Christ and their prayer for the world.

Shortly after the foundation of his monastery, Fr. Sophrony returned to the great love of his youth: painting. However, after his experience in Paris and Mount Athos and after his encounter with St. Silouan, he no longer tried to express an Eternity lost, through attempts to capture the beauty of nature. Instead, he turned to painting icons, using his artistic talent and education to express an Eternity found: the hypostatic Being of the Holy Trinity shining through the faces of Christ and His saints. He would tell his disciples, "Iconography in its essential form, is an inspiration for prayer, and a '*spring-board*' . . . to eternity."[296]

Aside from his return to the artistic expression of his early years, many other threads from his youthful search for Being and Eternity continued to reemerge throughout his later ministry. The theme of the abyss was something present in his mind until the end of his days. In a conversation with Elder Ephraim of Vatopaidi that occurred in 1992, a year before his death, Fr. Sophrony recalled his work as an abbot (1959-1974): "I was always hung from a thread above the abyss, shouting at God for everyone, for everything...because nothing happens by human strength."[297] In his book, *His Life is Mine* (1977), he provides a certain summary of his life, in which the search for Being figures strongly: "We are nearing the end of our long search to discover the depth of Being—a search that in the past involved us in one spiritual adventure after another. Now we press on towards the goal shown us by Christ, not dismayed but inspired by the magnitude of the task before us."[298] We can observe that until the end of his days he held before

[296] Gabriela, *Seeing Perfection,* 155.
[297] July 12th, 1992. Published in Πεμπτουσία, July, 2015. <http://pemptousia.com/2015/07/a-conversation-with-the-elder-sophrony/>
[298] Sophrony, *His Life is Mine,* 82.

him the vision of death's abyss, but that he overcame this death and became a universal man–bearing in his person at the same time both the "height and depth" (cf. Eph. 3:18) of Eternal Being. Fr. Sophrony reposed in the Lord on July 11th, 1993.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Elder Sophrony (Sakharov):
The Grace of Godforsakenness

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"(Matt. 5:3). For Elder Sophrony, this promise formed the essence of every ascetic endeavor. He never tired of showing the blessedness of poverty of spirit, the gift of the mindfulness of death, and the grace of Godforsakenness (*Bogoostavlennost*). He saw the withdrawal of grace[299] and its accompanying Charismatic despair as absolutely necessary. Even more so, he saw this event as the most creative and beneficial period of a Christian's life. He himself testifies that, in his own life, it was the mindfulness of death and blessed despair that carried him across the abyss of non-being and to the kingdom of heaven.[300] In our own age, so infected with an overwhelming sense of despair,

[299] Grace is understood by Elder Sophrony as "a gift of God's goodness—the uncreated supra-human and meta cosmic energy of Divinity," Arch. Sophrony, *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 184.
[300] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 75.

Elder Sophrony's words bring comfort: despair, when accompanied by repentance and faith in God leads to the vision of Christ in Glory; which is Eternal Life. The one who sees himself impoverished of every good thing finds Christ a fellow traveler and will not fail to see his soul resurrected.

Elder Sophrony envisioned the life of a Christian as one patterned after the life of Christ, especially as He is seen in His self-emptying at Gethsemane and Golgotha.[301] The grace of Godforsakenness experienced by the Christian is intimately linked with Christ's own abandonment, most fully expressed in His cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me"(Matt. 27:46). Self-emptying (κενόω) lies at the heart of the mystery of both Divine Being and human personhood. Elder Sophrony also saw the life of the Christian as patterned after the Hebrew's exodus from Egypt: the miracle of the Red Sea crossing, the arduous struggle in the wilderness, and the entrance into the promised land.[302] The spiritual life, Elder Sophrony attests, consists of three stages: the first visitation of grace, the withdrawal of grace, and the return of grace when this gift becomes one's own. As the following chapter explores Elder Sophrony's teachings on Godforsakenness, the Christian's Christ-like self-emptying will be discussed within the framework of these three stages of the spiritual life.

Elder Sophrony discouraged any attempt to construct a program for the spiritual life. The Christian does not plan his repentance nor force his way to salvation; he is rather thrown into an ocean and must either swim or die. Therefore, to speak of stages in spiritual life one must be cautious for it cannot be understood literally or chronologically. Elder Sophrony taught that

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[301] This vision reflects the teachings of the Orthodox Church Fathers, particularly St. Maximos (580-662), who saw Christ as both the *Logos* and the *Telos* of human existence. Christ is the supreme paradigm for Christian life. The Christian's effort to follow the pattern that Christ reveals at Gethsemane and Golgotha involves not simply *imitation* but *participation* and *transformation.*

[302] Ibid., 68. Cf. Arch. Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 37.

the spiritual life is like a sphere: at whatever point we come into contact with God's uncreated energies we touch the whole mystery of Divine Life, but in varying degrees.[303] Thus, in speaking of the visitation of grace in the first stage and the withdrawal of grace in the second, this is not to be understood rigidly or temporally. Until a person is perfected—often just prior to their death—the Christian continually vacillates between a perception of God's presence and the feeling of His withdrawal. Nonetheless, rooted in his own experience and affirmed by the teachings of the Church Fathers, Elder Sophrony perceived a general pattern in the varying degrees that God is experienced within the course of a Christian's struggle to become like Christ.

In a letter to David Balfour, Elder Sophrony reminds him, "When you were a small child divine grace visited you, and in this I see your calling from the Lord."[304] We have already been made aware of how Elder Sophrony himself, when yet a young child, was granted the grace to see the Eternal Light.[305] Saint Silouan, too, was still a young novice when he beheld the vision of Christ.[306] Elder Sophrony perceived these visitations of great grace as a "first calling," the first stage at which a person is initiated into God's work of salvation. This first grace is completely undeserved, unmerited, and unsought for: it is a pure gift. In this first period, the Christian, on the outset of his journey is given the "unjust riches" of which Christ speaks of in the Gospel of Luke (cf. 16:1-13).[307] Elder Sophrony indicates, "The measure of grace conferred at the beginning to attract and instruct may be no less than that accorded to the perfect."[308] In other words, the experiences of those at the first stage might closely resemble the experiences described by the saints. However, Elder Sophrony is quick to add, "This does not at all mean that

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[303] Sophrony, *Unpublished talk on monasticism* in Arch. Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 36.
[304] Idem., *Striving for Knowledge,* 89. Letter 6.
[305] Cf. Hill, p. 55.
[306] Cf. Sophrony., *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 26.
[307] Cf. Ibid., *On Prayer,* 69.
[308] Ibid., 68.

the fearful blessing is assimilated by those who have received it. The adoption of God's gift requires a long probation and hard striving."[309] That the gift of grace might become one's own possession requires that a Christian "convince" God of his fidelity.[310]

When the warmth of God's grace first floods a man's soul, he cannot stop giving thanks and expressing surprise: a new world, never imagined, has been opened to him. He is seized with a great love for God. In his "first-love" (Rev. 2:4), a love stronger than any earthly attraction, the Christian is glad to run the way of God's commandments (cf. Ps. 118:32). Everything comes easy to the man who is inspired by grace. He no sooner utters a cry for help than God is by his side, comforting him. Prayer, fasting and spiritual labors appear more desirable than all the pleasures of his previous life. His greets all men as dearest friends and calls no man his enemy.

Perhaps, in some degree, it can be said that no one has been born who has not received even the slightest touch of this grace. "The wind blows where it listeth" (Jn. 3:8) and the Spirit of God is no respecter of persons (cf. Rom. 2:11). Christ says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, if *any man* hear my voice, and open the door, I will enter" (Rev. 3:20). Elder Sophrony writes, "Many people have received grace, and not only in the Church but outside the Church too."[311] It is possible that the accounts of revival in the annals of religious history can be attributed to this "first call."[312] God "maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). All have, in some measure, been invited to the banquet of God's mercy (cf. Matt. 22:1-14), for He "desires the salvation of all men." (I Tim. 2:4).

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[309] Ibid.
[310] Ibid., 69.
[311] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 127.
[312] One example of such revival outside the Church can be found in Duncan Cambell's account of the Lewis Awakening in the Scottish Outer Hebrides islands (1949-1953).

The first stage of spiritual life contains enormous potential. It provides the energy by which a man can make a new beginning: he discovers a new mode of being and is granted to see, in part, the image of God in himself and is energized by a zeal to attain its likeness. However, there is also an enormous degree of instability at this stage. Elder Sophrony insisted that a man could contain the first grace for only the briefest amount of time: a few hours or days; in rare cases as much as seven years.[313] A man, having received the great gift of grace, begins to accept the thought that he somehow merited this gift. "The moment we are invaded by a false feeling of self-satisfaction," writes Elder Sophrony, "The Spirit of Life, proceeding from the Father forsakes us."[314] The Lord is humble and cannot bear a proud thought, and so departs.[315] When grace was with him, he had breathed the air of the perfect and had gradually considered himself to be among their rank. However, as soon as the "unjust riches" are withdrawn, he finds himself bereft of everything (*cf.* Lk. 16:9).[316] He sees himself the "chief among sinners," "a worm and not a man" (cf. I Tim. 1:5; Ps. 22:6). He calls but now God is seemingly deaf to his cry. "I had been introduced into the house of the Great King," recalls Elder Sophrony, "I was His kindred—but now [after the loss of grace] again I am no more than a homeless beggar."[317]

Pride lies at the root of every fall from grace. Through pride our first parents fell, thinking that through their own efforts they could become "like God" (Gen. 3:5). Pride, according to Elder Sophrony, "runs counter to Divine Love."[318] For this reason, the Light of

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[313] Cf. Arch Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 47.
[314] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 51.
[315] Elder Sophrony speaks strongly of the freedom of Man as being God's greatest gift. God, in His humility, will not broach upon this freedom but withdraws the moment man resists.
[316] "The grace that we receive in the beginning is not a permanent or stable state. It is 'unjust riches' or 'the unrighteous mammon', as Father Sophrony calls it." Zacharias, *Remember,* 148.
[317] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 13.
[318] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 122.

God--which is humility—cannot dwell in a heart that is proud.[319] God does not punish the soul; He merely leaves the soul that has made no room for His grace. The wilderness of God's abandonment is not an experience that God actively inflicts upon the soul; instead it is the Creator giving His creature the freedom to remain alone, autonomous, apart from God. Nonetheless, to him who has basked in the warmth of God's first grace and then become bereft of it, there are no words to describe his pain. Elder Sophrony relates, "The soul hangs suspended in space over the abyss, and is terrified, for God seems completely unattainable."[320]

Writing to Balfour, Elder Sophrony relates from his own experience, "There is no tribulation upon earth harder to bear than the tribulation of the soul when she loses grace."[321] In the writings of Saint Silouan, one finds the following powerful image:

> A country cock lives in a small yard and is content with its lot. But the eagle flies up under the clouds and beholds the blue horizons, knows many lands, has seen forest and meadow, rivers and mountain, sea and city; and if you were to clip his wings and put him to live with the cock in the farmyard—O how would he pine for the blue sky and the crags of the desert. Thus it is with every soul that has known grace and lost it: she is inconsolable in her grief.[322]

The second stage is predominated by a sense of Godforsakenness, leading to blessed despair. There are, of course, many kinds of despair: there is an ungodly despair in which a man exhibits ingratitude for God's gift of life, taking his life in his own hands and ending it on his own terms. There is a despair in which a man displays a lack of care for his own salvation. This despair is

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[319] Cf. Saint Silouan in Sophrony, *Saint Silouan,* 299. And *cf.* Arch. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 23.
[320] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 50.
[321] Idem., *Striving for Knowledge,* 153. This is a singular statement when one considers the staggering volume of horrific suffering of which he was a contemporary. This is not because Elder Sophrony was unsympathetic to the physical and mental pain experienced by his fellows, instead it is because he had personally experienced both and had learned that the spiritual bereavement of the loss of grace was even greater than a mother's yearning for her child. Cf. *Saint Silouan,* 327.
[322] Saint Silouan in Sophrony, *Saint Silouan,* 323-324; 486-487.

known in ascetic literature as despondency (ἀκηδία).[323] Saint Silouan was told: "keep thy mind in hell, and despair not."[324] In other words, he was never to renounce hope in God's mercy and never to cease striving for his own salvation. Nevertheless, Elder Sophrony indicates that there is also a "blessed despair."[325] "Through despair of this kind," he adds, "I was reborn into Light."[326]

There are many reasons why God forsakes the soul: Pride and self-satisfaction, the instability of fallen human nature not yet perfected, a momentary lapse from the Law of Love, if only in thought.[327] However, divine abandonment is fundamentally an experience by which God trains and perfects the soul. It is therefore an overall positive and absolutely necessary experience. Elder Sophrony, in a letter to Balfour, writes, "My profound conviction is that if you—this goes for everybody—do not live through these ordeals[:] poverty, humiliations, perhaps even hunger, utter abandonment by everybody—by men and even by God too . . . you will never know divine love."[328] He goes on to affirm, "The heart that is not broken by the wounds of tribulations and has not been humbled unto the end by every form of poverty, both spiritual and material, will never be fitted to receive divine grace." It is for this reason that Elder Sophrony

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[323] "Despondency is paralysis of soul, an enervation of the mind, neglect of asceticism, hatred of the vow made. It calls those who are in the world blessed. It accuses God of being merciless and without love for men. It is being languid in singing psalms, weak in prayer" St. John, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent,* Step 13, Brookline MA.: Holy Transfiguration Monastery Press, 2012. Pp. 132-134.
[324] Sophrony, *Saint Silouan,* 460.
[325] Idem., *On Prayer,* 50.
[326] Ibid.
[327] Cf. The life of Abba Isaac the Theban who fell from grace after passing judgment on a fellow monk (*cf. The Saying of the Desert Father,* B. Ward, 109-110). Elder Sophrony explained that the monks described in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, who were confined to the Prison, were people who had received great grace, even to the degree of beholding the Uncreated Light, but who had later fallen from this grace and were ready to bear unimaginable hardships to regain this grace (in Elder Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 192). St. John writes in the *Ladder,* "For the soul that has lost its former confidence . . . that has allowed its treasury of gifts to be robbed; that has become a stranger to divine consolation . . . will even devoutly resolve to kill itself with ascetical labours, if only there is in it a remnant of a spark of love or fear of the Lord." *Ladder,* Step 5 (p. 103).
[328] Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge,* 219.

"never stopped talking" about the "blessed despair" of Godforsakenness.[329] Blessed in the sense that he perceived this as a "Charismatic event," an action of grace (charism), albeit its withdrawal.

Elder Sophrony speaks of the "Hell of Godforsakenness,"[330] the flames therein arising from the pain of God's tangible absence. However, he also understood that the presence of the Holy Spirit could be experienced as a burning fire. In a conversation with Metropolitan Hierothoes (Vlachos), Elder Sophrony related, "It is a law of the spiritual life that first we experience God negatively as fire and then positively as Light."[331] This fire is purgative and not punitive as it leads the Christian to recognize his own vileness and to place all his hope in God. The one who rightly enters the struggle of the second stage is characterized by a maximal effort to keep God's commandants and an extreme awareness of his inability to do so. The Light of God's presence reveals both God's holiness and the darkness contained in a person's heart, hitherto hidden by ignorance and pride.

Elder Sophrony, describing this two-fold vision, writes, "The uncreated Light discloses our inner hell and at the same time allows us to sense the holiness of the Living God."[332] He adds that those in the "agony of repentance are given the experience both of hell and of the resurrection."[333] This grace-given vision leads to an abandonment of all vestiges of self-satisfaction. Love of God, according to Elder Sophrony, leads to self hatred; hatred of the self apart from God; love of God to the point of self-forgetfulness.[334] In summary, Godforsakenness can be understood as both God's withdrawal of His comforting grace and as an intensification of

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[329] Idem., *On Prayer,* 50.
[330] Idem., *Striving for Knowledge,* 232.
[331] Arch. Sophrony in Met. Hierotheos (Vlachos), *I Know a Man in Christ,* 223.
[332] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 44.
[333] Ibid., 45.
[334] Cf. Ibid., 141-149; and *cf.* idem., *On Prayer,* 53, 58.

that grace in the form of an illumining fire by which a man sees his failure to keep the commandment: to love God with all one's being (cf. Matt. 22:37).

The painful longing and thirst for the Uncreated experienced in the second stage, without conscious effort, detaches the soul from everything created. The man who looks with horror at the evil lurking in his heart can no more find pleasure in the world's beauty than can the criminal condemned to be hung at dawn. Where as in the first stage the soul saw everyone and everything bathed in the Light of God, in the second stage the soul recognizes that, abandoned by God, life is a mad farce; it can only lead to the abyss of non-being. Elder Sophrony speaks frequently of a special *charism* that often accompanies God's withdrawal: the grace of the Mindfulness of Death. This is not simply a psychological knowledge that we will all some day die. Instead, it is a gift of God—albeit a terrifying one—by which a man comes "face to face with Eternity, to begin with in its negative aspect, when all existence is seen to be in this grip of death."[335] It is a vision by which man recognizes that he is existentially linked to all creation. Elder Sophrony recalls, "My inevitable death was not just mine . . . with me, all that had formed part of my consciousness would die: people close to me, their suffering and love, the whole historical progress, the universe in general, the sun, the stars, endless space; even the creator Himself—He, too, would die."[336] Later, it will be seen how this vision awakens the Hypostatic Principle in man, and is therefore ultimately positive.[337] However, at first this grace works to detach the soul from seeking consolation in the "lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye and the pride of life" (I Jn. 2:16).

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[335] Idem., *On Prayer,* 75.
[336] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 12.
[337] Cf. Hill, pp. 91-92.

When still a young man, a successful artist living in Moscow and Paris, Elder Sophrony was overtaken by the grace of the Mindfulness of Death. In his autobiography, he describes its effects:

> Everything subject to decay lost its value for me. When I looked at people, without thinking further I saw them in the power of death, dying, and my heart was flooded with fellow-suffering. I wanted neither fame from those 'dead mortals' nor power over them. I did not look to people to like me. I despised material wealth and did not think much of intellectual assets which afforded no answer to what I was seeking. Had I been offered centuries of happy life, I would have refused them. My spirit required eternal life, and *eternity.*[338]

The Christian inevitably faces the temptation to find his consolation in something other than God. This temptation is suppressed in the first stage but is redoubled when God withdraws His grace in the second stage. The ascetic writings of the Church Fathers provide many ways by which to struggle with temptation. Yet, none is as effective as the Mindfulness of Death and the "blessed despair" which Elder Sophrony so highly praised. When a thought of lust or some other passion approaches, the uninitiated must resort to psychological methods or bodily afflictions to ward off the temptation. However, he who endures the hell of Godforsakenness finds that such temptations hold no sway over him.[339] He who has his mind in hell lives at a different level, *below* the barrage of temptations. There is no method or program to such an approach: it is a gift granted when and to whom God so desires. Blessed despair and the Mindfulness of Death are not cultivated, only endured.[340] Despite the extreme pain of the experience, the Christian knows that when his mind emerges from the fire, temptations return and thus he learns to "keep his mind in hell, and despair not."[341]

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[338] *Op cit.*, 16.
[339] Elder Sophrony tells David Balfour, based on his own experience, "Every carnal lust was totally extinguished by the action of mindfulness of death." Letter 2, *Striving for Knowledge,* 58.
[340] Cf. Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 45.
[341] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 460; cf. idem., *On Prayer,* 51.

The grace of Godforsakenness is the teacher of genuine asceticism: one that seeks only to decrease that God might increase (cf. Jn. 3:30); an asceticism free from every ambition to "reach heaven" (Gen. 11:4); an asceticism dominated by the thought: "all will be saved and I alone will stand condemned."[342] Godforsakenness, while including this element of divesture, also contains within its experience a completely positive aspect. Through the grace of Godforsakenness, the Christian enters into the mystery of Eternal Being. As paradoxical as it may seem, God is revealed at the moment when the Christian feels most strongly that he has been utterly abandoned.[343] This is because Divine Life is ineffably one of abandonment: abandonment in the sense of self-emptying (κενόω). Each Person of the Holy Trinity ineffably empties Their whole Being and Life to the Other in an eternal act of self-emptying.[344] Thus, when the Christian empties his being for the sake of his love for God to the point of self-hatred, he finds Divine Life suddenly pouring into his heart. Godforsakenness conforms human nature to the mode of Divine Being, which is, in essence, one of self-emptying.[345]

Christ, being the express image of the Father, in His incarnation presented the most perfect revelation of Divine Life. Elder Sophrony often refers in his writings to Philippians 2:5-8,[346] where the Apostle Paul writes, "Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God . . . made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: . . . He humbled [ἐκένωσεν] and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). Elder Sophrony understood Christ's earthly ministry, His betrayal, His

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[342] Cf. The words of the shoemaker to St. Anthony, "All the people in this city, from the least to the greatest, will be saved, and only I will be condemned for my many sins," in *The Ancient Fathers of the Desert,* Arch. Chrysostomos, Brookline, MA.: Hellenic College Press, 1980. 88.
[343] Cf. Arch. Zacharias, *Remember,* 193.
[344] Cf. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 139, 216, 234; idem., *On Prayer,* 25. Cf. Jn. 14:10.
[345] For a fuller explanation, see Arch. Zacharias, *Christ, Our Way and Our Life,* pp. 17-29.
[346] Cf. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 131, 132, 135, etc.

death and finally, His descent into hell as one, continual act of self-emptying. He especially noted Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, where "being in agony, He prayed more earnestly" (Lk. 22:44). Elder Sophrony remarks, "Christ's love on earth spells extreme suffering . . . He descended into hell, into the most painful hell of all, the hell of love."[347] His love desires the salvation of all (cf. I Tim. 2:4); and yet even "His own received Him not" (Jn. 1:11); He is betrayed by Judas, deserted by His disciples, and abandoned by God. He cries out, "My God, my God why hast Thou abandoned [ἐγκαταλείπω] Me" (Matt. 27:46). Yet, not only is such self-emptying love a voluntary act, it is an expression, the most perfect expression of Divine Life.[348]

However, this is but one "pole of Divine love,"[349] the negative pole of Eternal Being. The other pole, the positive aspect is one of inexpressible glory. Christ, going to His voluntary death exclaims, "Now is the Son of man glorified" (Jn 13:31). Elder Sophrony observes that, at the crucifixion, "The Christ-man is exalted: no one can come up to Him in the act of His self-emptying."[350] These two things are so closely linked, God's glory and His humility, that Elder Sophrony comments, "Everyone who ardently loves Jesus Christ, God our Creator and Saviour, without fail experiences two states of being that would seem to be diametrically opposed: descent into hell and ascent into heaven."[351] It is precisely because "Christ emptied [ἐκένωσεν] Himself, having become obedient unto death" that "God also hath highly exalted him, and given Him a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:8,9). Divine Life is both and at the same time one of extreme humility and exaltation.

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[347] Ibid., *His Life is Mine,* 91.
[348] Cf. Idem., *We Shall See,* 139.
[349] Ibid., 136.
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid., 137.

Judging from this observation, Elder Sophrony proposes a crucial formula: "The deeper one goes in self-condemnation, the higher God raises one."[352] In the second stage, when God withdraws His grace the Christian is led along the same path that Christ followed: through Gethsemane, to Golgotha in order to experience, in some measure, the "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (Eph. 3:18) of Divine Life. Elder Sophrony writes in his chapter on Christ's prayer in Gethsemane, "It is vital to have experienced, if only once, the heavenly fire which Christ brought with Him to know with our entire being what it is to be even a little like Christ."[353] If Christ experienced abandonment by God (cf. Matt. 27:44), then the Christian cannot expect anything less. If Christ "descended first into the lower parts of the earth" (Eph. 4:9), then the Christian can follow no other path than that which leads to hell, the hell of love. But following this path, he finds Christ as a fellow traveler and the *night is turned into light* in his joy (cf. Ps. 138:10 LXX).

Elder Sophrony illustrated the paradoxical nature of the Christian's assimilation to Divine Life using two images: a pyramid and a tree. "In the structure of the world" Elder Sophrony explains, "we observe a hierarchal order, a division of upper and lower—a pyramid of being."[354] After man's original fall from grace, the world is arranged so that the stronger rule over the weaker. Yet, humans naturally desire equality and thus the weaker struggle against the stronger. Enter the millenary tragedy of revolution and repression. Christ, according to Elder Sophrony, "does not deny the … division into upper and lower, into overlord and servant; but He turns the pyramid upside down."[355] Instead of standing as Lord and Master upon the shoulders of

[352] Idem., *His Life is Mine,* 86.
[353] Ibid., 91.
[354] Idem., *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* 237.
[355] Ibid.

His subjects, He lowers Himself below all who come to Him. Elder Sophrony adds, "He is the summit of the inverted pyramid, the summit on which the whole weight of the pyramid of being falls."[356] Likewise, "The Christian goes *downwards*, into the depths of the overturned pyramid where the crushing weight is concentrated—to the place where the Lord is, Who took upon Himself the sins of the world—Christ."[357] The motif is thus repeated: to descend is to ascend.

This motif is further depicted in Elder Sophrony's analogy of the tree. He writes, "When we see a centuries-old tree with its branches reaching to the clouds, we know that its roots, deep in the earth, must be powerful enough to support the whole."[358] As tall as the tree is above ground, one may assume the same for the depth of its roots. Elder Sophrony observed something very similar in the Christian life. He writes, "If, like the apostles, we recognize the greatness of our calling in Christ . . . it makes us humble, not proud. This lowering, this humbling of ourselves is essential if we would preserve a genuinely Christian disposition." [359] In other words, the Christian struggle consists in humbling oneself, in constantly digging deeper and deeper into the earth, the *humus* of humility. Genuine Christians, as Elder Zacharias observes, "do not consider themselves worthy of any spiritual gift; they only try to learn one thing, namely, to go down before God, *because then surely they will be exalted in due time.*"[360] And this is the image that Christ Himself presents at His life-giving death: nailed upon the Tree of the Cross His body descends to Hades, His eyes are lifted to His Father in heaven and His arms are stretched out to

[356] Ibid., 238.
[357] Ibid., 238-239.
[358] Idem., *His Life is Mine,* 85.
[359] Ibid., 86.
[360] Arch. Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart,* 54. *Emphasis added.*

embrace all things. But this is also the image that every Christian is called to conform to its likeness.[361]

Godforsakenness is thus but one facet of Divine Life, which can be described (though not defined) as Love and Humility. This Love and Humility includes within its Being both heaven and hell, both ineffable joy and ineffable pain. Elder Sophrony writes, "Christianity is not some philosophical doctrine but actual *life.* Life and love 'to the end'—to hate for oneself. This is the *great mystery of godliness*' [I Tim. 3:16]."[362] How contrary to one's natural way of thinking is that to attain God's likeness (Gen. 1:26) and to be a partaker of His nature (II Pt. 1:4) would necessitate the dark night of abandonment, leading to complete self-emptying. But, such is the "great mystery." No one could discover this path alone or by any method; it is a gift. Elder Sophrony, reflecting the teaching of his elder, St. Silouan, writes, "It is by the gift of the Holy Spirit . . . that we in our Church existentially, by actual experience, know the *Self-emptying* of the Son. He, the Holy Spirit, shows us the self-emptying that lies before us, too."[363] This is the key to successfully passing through the Dark Night of Godforsakenness: to recognize it as a gift of incalculable value.

Elder Zacharias recalls, "A few months before he died, Father Sophrony gave a remarkable talk about man's adoption by God."[364] In this talk, he speaks of the trials of the second stage as a preparation for the third: man's birth into Eternity. "Every day we say to God, 'I am Thine, save me' (Ps. 118:94 LXX).[365] But who are we to say to God that we are His? We must

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[361] Cf. Rom. 6:5 "We have been planted together in the likeness of His death."
[362] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 138.
[363] Ibid., 139.
[364] Arch. Zacharias, *Remember Thy First Love,* 307.
[365] In monasteries, Psalm 118 (LXX) is read every morning, typically at the Midnight Office (2am).

convince Him that we are His."[366] The Christian accomplishes this by following Christ's humble way during the second stage. Preserving maximum tension between a love for God and a hatred of self, God sees in this self-emptying a resonance with His own mode of Being. Once this occurs, Elder Sophrony continues, "We will hear His voice saying to us, 'Yes, thou art My son, this day have I begotten thee.'"[367] The gift of God's presence, given as a token during the first stage, becomes one's own in the third stage. The soul, who at the first call was a guest in God's house, feasting on the tangible gifts of grace, is now recalled as a beloved son.

As mentioned before, this event may not occur until the very end of one's earthly life. The greatest saints struggled for many years before they were born from on high in a more or less permanent, stable way. Even so, St. Anthony, the great 4th century ascetic told his fellow monks, "This is the great work of a man: always to take blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath."[368] Elder Sophrony echoes this sober reminder when he writes to Balfour, "Essentially speaking, it is impossible to 'live' as a Christian. It is only possible to 'die' as a Christian, a thousand deaths every day."[369] There is, in a certain sense, a reluctance to emerge from or to lessen the extreme tension experienced during the second stage. Elder Sophrony writes, "[The soul] cannot come down from the cross because every time she considers 'coming down' [cf. Matt. 27:40] from this cross the flow of real eternity decreases in her."[370] He recalls from his personal experience that every time the life-giving fear and blessed despair would

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[366] *Op. cit.* Cf. Zacharias, *Remember,* p. 417, "In fact it is not God we convince; rather it is ourselves we must convince that out lives are worthy of preserving grace."
[367] Ibid.
[368] Attributed to Abba Anthony, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers,* translated and edited by Benedicta Ward, Kalamazoo, MI.: Cistercian Press, 1975. p. 2.
[369] Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge,* 243. It is notable that Elder Sophrony already possessed this understanding of the Christian life at this early date (April 7th, 1936). Much later (1948), he would include this expression in his book Старец Силуана, p. 236.
[370] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 138.

abate "I would feel a slackening of the vital strength within me. Prayer grew weak, my mind was distracted, the sense of the divine disappeared in the mist—my spirit began to die."[371] But slowly, the Christian learns to "keep their mind in hell," even when the warmth of grace returns and to live in both hell and paradise simultaneously.

The Christian spends a vast majority of his earthly struggle nailed to the cross, stretched between these two states. Elder Sophrony writes to Balfour, "The alternation between waves of darkness and of light—this, you know, is the lot of the monks."[372] However, the negative experience of the second stage gradually gives way to the positive vision of the third. Fear is slowly replaced by perfect love (cf. I Jn. 4:18);[373] the Refiner's fire is slowly replaced by the Light of the Uncreated Sun; the negative asceticism, fueled by the *blessed despair* of the Godforsakenness, becomes less necessary in the third stage as the "impulsion of the spirit towards God, in prayer, compassion, [and] love" increase.[374] Elder Sophrony describes the third stage as "grace and created nature knit together and become one . . . it is the transfiguration of the whole man through which he becomes Christ-like, perfect."[375] In the third stage, the soul is given the "true riches, to possess imprescriptibly for ever."[376] Among these riches, Elder Sophrony focuses on three particular gifts: pure prayer, hypostatic being, and the vision of the Uncreated Light. The remaining portion of this chapter will be dedicated to an exploration of these three gifts.

In his book, *Saint Silouan the Athonite,* Elder Sophrony describes three forms or levels of prayer: prayer of the imagination (φαντασία), prayer of meditation (διαλογισμική

[371] Ibid., 143.
[372] Idem., *Striving for Knowledge,* 263.
[373] Cf. St. Anthony of Egypt, "I no longer fear God, for I love Him," Ward, 8.
[374] Sophrony, *Striving for Knowledge*, 276.
[375] Idem., *On Prayer,* 69.
[376] Ibid.

προσευχή), and pure prayer (καθαρή προσευχή). The first form of prayer, he writes, "Imprisons man in constant error, in an imaginary world, [and] in a world of dreams."[377] If the Christian persists in this form of prayer, "not only unfruitfulness but deep-rooted spiritual ill-health may result."[378] The second form of prayer (meditation) is a self-driven prayer, though occasionally accompanied by grace, wherein the Christian focuses his mental faculties on abstract concepts or the words of a prayer. This labor can lead the one who prays to a certain philosophical intuition and an awareness of the Divine but it leaves him blind to the subtle passions of vanity and pride. Elder Sophrony writes, "Having accumulated a measure of religious knowledge and achieved relatively decorous behavior, content with matters, he gradually takes to speculative theology."[379] The third form of prayer is pure prayer. Elder Sophrony describes pure prayer as the following:

> When the created human mind, the created human *persona*,[380] stands before the Supreme Mind, before the Personal God, it attains to genuinely pure and perfect prayer, but only when from love of God every created thing is set aside is the world forgotten . . . and one's very body is ignored that there is no telling whether one was in the body or outside the body in the hour of prayer. Such prayer—pure in the primary sense—prayer is a rare gift of God. It depends in no way on human effort.[381]

Pure prayer is preeminently prayer without images, prayer in which the mind (*nous*) is stationed in the heart and there it "cannot be distracted, [and] no irrelevant thought can intrude."[382]

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[377] Idem., *Saint Silouan*, 132.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.
[380] *Persona* is to be understood here according to Elder Sophrony's teaching on the hypostatic principle discussed in the next section: *Persona* as *hypostasis* and not as individual.
[381] *Op cit*.., 141.
[382] Ibid., 140. Arch. Zacharias recounts the following interaction between St. Silouan and Elder Sophrony: "As they were going to the hut [that Fr. Sophrony had been given for solitude] St. Silouan asks Fr. Sophrony, 'And how goes the prayer in your place of silence?' Fr Sophrony answered, 'When I pray, I have the feeling that the world is forgotten, but I still have the sense of my body.' And Father Silouan replied, 'And is our body not the world?' Fr. Sophrony marveled at the word of St. Silouan, at his understanding of pure prayer." Arch. Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart,* 123.

One of the greatest benefits of God's withdrawal and the accompanying despair is the resulting detachment of the soul from everything created and imaginary. Godforsakenness is a necessary prerequisite for pure prayer. Elder Sophrony relates, "The contrite spirit in fatal longing after God the Savior is totally drawn to Him. And man himself does not know when and how the change in him occurred: he forgets the material world and his own body."[383] Through the pain of repentance, the soul is detached from a manner of praying that is imaginative or meditative; God has withdrawn and nothing created, material or imagined can serve as His substitute. This pain is centered in the heart, the center of a person's being, and the mind naturally shifts its attention to the place of greatest pain.[384] The pain of blessed despair unites a person's mind with their heart and he stands before God with this one thought: "Not to lose such a God."[385]

Genuine detachment can only proceed from the grace of Godforsakenness. An ascetic, self-willed divestment of the material world leads to a distorted, negative vision of what God created and called "good" (Gen. 1:31). Alone, it cannot grant a positive vision of God. Elder Sophrony expresses this sentiment in the following words: "I have renounced all that is ephemeral but God is not with me."[386] Such is the negative vision of the "Areopagites"[387] and the religions of the Far East. These divest themselves of every material and imaginative form but fail to be invested with any positive vision. Reaching the edge of the abyss and gazing into its depths through mental exercise they fail to reach the opposite side. Elder Sophrony asks, "Is not this

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[383] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 25. Cf. II Cor. 12:2.
[384] Cf. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 177. And *cf.* Zacharias, *The Enlargement of the Heart,* 151.
[385] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 21
[386] Ibid., 71.
[387] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 139. The "Areopagites" refer to the philosophers whom the Apostle Paul encountered on Mars Hill. These "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21).

'outer darkness'—hell itself?"[388] Absence is mistaken for vision, hell for heaven. Elder Sophrony, speaking from his own experience, describes another vision, the fruit of blessed despair: "The Lord absorbs me completely. I both see and do not see my surroundings. My eye glances around at intervals when I am busy with the unavoidable preoccupations of everyday life. But whether I am asleep or awake, God is closer to me than the air I breathe."[389]

The journey toward pure prayer is by no means easy or brief. The struggle with intrusive thoughts spells enormous suffering, yet this suffering is creative: "it does not destroy."[390] In pure prayer, the self is transcended for the sake of the *Other*; "At the same time he continues to be himself as *persona*, to be aware of himself more firmly and clearly than he ever was in his customary state."[391] The self-emptying associated with the experience of Godforsakenness is not the annihilation of personhood. It is instead the revelation of what it truly means to be a person. Through the blessed despair of the second stage, man discovers the hypostatic principal within himself.

The hypostatic[392] principal (ἀρχὴ ὑπόστασις) is that "image" which man was given in the beginning and of which he is called to attain the "likeness" (cf. Gen. 1:26). Elder Sophrony writes, "The personal principle in man contains, first and foremost, his likeness to Him Who

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[388] Idem., *On Prayer,* 71.
[389] Ibid., 79. A certain Fr. Spiridon expressed to Fr. Silouan his frustration, "So it is, one prays and prays, but when the time comes and you have to pay attention to your work, prayer gets interrupted." St. Silouan responded, "It is not like that with us." Shocked, Fr. Spiridon went to the ailing hierodeacon Sophrony and asked him the meaning of Fr. Silouan's words. After their conversation, Fr. Spiridon realized the height of pure prayer that Fr. Silouan has attained so that, even when working, he was able to keep his mind in communion with God (*cf. Saint Silouan,* p. 125-126).
[390] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 46. Cf. Iulia de Beausobre, *Creative Suffering*. London: Dacre Press, 1940.
[391] Ibid., 25.
[392] Elder Sophrony preferred to preserve the Greek term, *hypostasis*, in writing about personhood. In doing so, he could maintain the historical, nuanced understanding of the term, refined especially during the Ecumenical Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries. He also avoided the confusion common in modern times to equate person with individual. Hypostasis (person) is diametrically opposed to the concept of individual, as it is understood today.

revealed Himself to us under the name *I AM.*"[393] God is a Person, not a supra-personal energy. He is "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14). Man, likewise has the potential, contained in the "image" of God in him, to also be a *person*, an *I* that is not the *I AM.* The actualization of this potential occurs through the pain of Godforsakenness.

Through the grace of Godforsakenness and its accompanying mindfulness of death, a man realizes his existential link with all men and all creation. This vision is at first negative; he sees all things under the dominion of death and witnesses his own death as a universal death.[394] However, this vision reveals that he is, in a mysterious manner, the centre of creation, that all things are somehow contained in his person. Through the grace of Godforsakenness, he beholds Christ as He ascends the cross, bearing in Himself the whole world (cf. Is. 53:4,5) and thereby gathering together all things in Himself (cf. Eph. 1:10). The Christian by this grace also beholds in his own soul the bitter roots of selfishness: the desire for dominion and survival in opposition to the *other*. The deformity of the "image" given him and his *un*likeness to Christ inspires in the soul of the Christian a holy self-hatred. But, it is precisely this holy self-hatred that gives birth to true being: hypostatic being.

Elder Sophrony marvels at this paradox. This revelation cannot have anything but a divine source. What man would teach, "Detest yourself because of love for God and you will embrace all that exists with your love?"[395] In the awakening of the hypostatic principle, "The *I* is forgotten in the transport of love for the God of love but nevertheless it is this *I* that blissfully contains in itself all heaven and earth."[396] The hypostatic principle is therefore at once a total

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[393] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 192.
[394] Cf. Ibid., 13.
[395] Ibid., 199.
[396] Ibid.

self-emptying love and an all-embracing power through which human nature, all creation and even God become the content of one's being. Through an effort to hold in tension these two extremes, a sketch of the hypostatic principle can be made out. However, Elder Sophrony emphasizes that "the Hypostacity of God escapes definition,"[397] and adds that even the human hypostasis is "hidden" and likewise escapes definition. Elder Sophrony preferred rather to offer the portrait of his Elder, Saint Silouan, as an example a true man in the likeness of the True Man, Jesus Christ.[398]

In this portrait, one defining characteristic predominates: Saint Silouan's hypostatic prayer. Hypostatic in the sense that it was all-embracing. Saint Silouan relates that he would often "pray for all as I *pray for myself*."[399] Silouan was a simple schema-monk and had perhaps, due to his lack of formal education, never seen a map of the world and yet he prayed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "O Merciful Lord, give Thy grace to all the peoples of the earth that they may come to know Thee."[400] Moreover, he indicated in his writings that the infallible criterion for judging the progress of one's spiritual life is whether one has attained love of enemies.[401] A love that is completely self-emptying sees with spiritual eyes the existential unity between all peoples and the man thus graced considers his brother to be his life.[402] Such a love cannot be content for even a single soul not to know God. But such a perfect love is born only through the terrible travail of Godforsakenness. Having experienced God's love in the first stage and then become bereft of this love, the Christian knows by painful familiarity that "There is no

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[397] Ibid., 192.
[398] Cf. Arch. Zacharias, *Man, The Target of God,* 76.
[399] Sophrony, *Saint Silouan,* 350.
[400] Ibid., 364.
[401] Cf. Ibid., 114.
[402] Cf. Ibid., 47.

greater affliction, no more bitter pain, than not to know God."[403] Thus, he prays for the salvation of his enemies all the while considering himself to be undeserving of this same salvation—not aware that by such love he been born anew into Divine Life.

Elder Sophrony bears particular witness to the severity of man's brokenness. His words express with unique intensity the horror of man as he exists in his fallen state apart from God. Yet, his deep sorrow is due only to the fact that his vision for man's potential is so great. The force with which he describes the darkness of Godforsakenness is only the result of his vision of the Uncreated Light. Through this experience, Elder Sophrony was made witness that "created being, by the gift of God's pleasure, [can be] made a partaker of uncreated, unoriginate Life . . . to receive the divine form of being, to become god by grace."[404] Through the action of God's Uncreated Light, "a wondrous flower blossoms—the *persona*, the hypostasis."[405] In the Uncreated Light, the Christian *knows,* not intellectually but existentially, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and "sees God (Matt. 5:8)."[406] Such was the grandeur of Elder Sophrony's vision of the person in whom the hypostatic principle is realized.

Within the second stage, God is experienced frequently as a "consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29) and the resulting divesture of every attachment of created forms is often perceived as a darkness. Nonetheless, "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (I Jn. 1:5). Elder Sophrony pronounces woe to the man who mistakes the "darkness of divesture on the borders of true vision" for the vision of God itself.[407] He affirms repeatedly, "God reveals Himself in light

[403] Idem., *We Shall See Him,* 198.
[404] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 174.
[405] Ibid., 186.
[406] Ibid., 187.
[407] Ibid., 179.

and as light."[408] It is true that God appeared to Moses at Mount Sinai *in* the "darkness" (γνόφος)(Ex. 20:21). Elder Sophrony however, argues that after the incarnation of God in the flesh, His Divinity is always revealed as Light, appearing in a "bright cloud" (νεφέλη φωτεινή)(Matt. 17:4).[409] Darkness is a necessary experience, but a negative one. Unless it is followed by the positive investment of the third stage, epitomized in the vision of Christ in the glory of His Uncreated Light, the darkness of divesture and the torment of abandonment remains fruitless. The entire purpose of God's gift of the blessed despair and His withdrawal is the attainment of true personhood granted by the vision of His Uncreated Light.

Elder Sophrony states plainly: "Divine Light is eternal life, the Kingdom of God, the uncreated energy of Divinity. It is not contained in created human nature and, being of a different kind, it cannot be discovered through ascetic techniques. It comes exclusively as a gift of God's mercy."[410] The vision of the Uncreated Light is the free gift given to those who have proven themselves to be faithful stewards through the trials of the second stage. It is the blessedness of those whose hearts have been purified and strengthened to "see God" (Matt. 5:8). This vision is not of God's essence but of His Uncreated energy.[411] It is God as He appears in His self-emptying revelation. It is God Himself but the knowledge afforded is not the same knowledge as possessed by the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, Who are of one substance (ὁμοούσιος). Neither in life nor in death can that which is created be absorbed into the nature of

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[408] Ibid.
[409] Idem., *Félicité de connaître la voie: des principes en orthodoxie*. Translated by Hieromonk Symeon, Geneva, 1988.
[410] Op. cit. 173.
[411] Cf. St. John Chrysostom, "When [God] wishes to show Himself, He does not appear as He is, nor is His bare essence revealed—for no one has seen God as He is. For at His condescension (συγκατάβασις) even the cherubim trembled: He condescended, and the mountains smoked . . . Therefore, He appears not as He is, but as that which the beholder is able to see" *In Eutropium Eunuchum II 9* (PG 59:98) in Veniamin, *The Orthodox Understanding of Salvation*. Dalton: Mount Tabor Publishing, 2013. p. 96.

the Uncreated. The mystery of both Divine and human personhood preserves the distinction between created and Uncreated nature. Nonetheless, man who by nature is "dust of the ground" can participate in the *mode of being* of the Uncreated Divine Persons, primarily through his vision of the heavenly Light even while still on earth.[412]

It is inevitable that man encounter suffering both on a personal and universal level. The man who seeks to alleviate this suffering by withdrawing his mind from all earthly attachments peers down the dark abyss of non-being and is deceived by the thought that he has discovered true Being. The Christian too reaches the edge of this abyss when he encounters the Gospel commandments. "By their very nature," Elder Sophrony explains, "The soul stands over abysses where our unenlightened spirit sees no way."[413] However, through the energy granted through the grace of Godforsakenness, the Christian despises his own life, spurns the danger and "like lightning"(cf. Lk. 10:18), he flashes "across the abyss to settle on the opposite shore,"[414] to God, "the Father of lights" (James 1:17), Who exclaims, "My son, this day have I begotten you" (Ps. 2:7).

[412] Elder Sophrony understands *mode of existence* in an energetic way (i.e. the mode by which God pours out His Uncreated energy to creation). The Cappadocian Fathers use *mode of being* in a hypostatic way (i.e. to distinguish between the personal manner of generation (ex. the Son is *begotten* of the Father but the Holy Spirit *proceeds* from the Father)).
[413] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 58.
[414] Ibid., 59.

CONCLUSION:

Elder Sophrony's Unique Contribution

To be a *person* is a beautiful thing, but a thing most incredibly fragile. Everyday, thousands of lives are brought into existence only to be quickly extinguished through war, acts of terror, murder, poverty and disease. Furthermore, the complexity of modern life, the dissonance of conflicting moralities, and a gnawing fear that "God is dead," have produced in many an overwhelming feeling of purposelessness and despair. The whole world lies under the threatening skies of a Dark Night and for many it seems better to return to non-being than continue to live in a state of complete despair. Yet, there is but one cause for the infectious disease that has made death more desirable than life: we have forsaken God and become bereft of His life-giving grace. To this general state of Godforsakenness, Elder Sophrony brings a unique word of comfort: our generation has the unique opportunity to discover in its despair a resurrecting energy.

In the year 1905, Einstein's equation, $E=mc^2$, unleashed tremendous potential for apocalyptic destruction. Elder Sophrony remarks that it was perhaps the same year that Christ gave to Saint Silouan the equation: "Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not."[415] Over the course of the previous chapters, we have explored the life and teachings of John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony concerning the Dark Night of the soul and the grace of Godforsakenness. There is certainly much within John of the Cross that we can affirm and value. However, with the urgency prompted by our dark times, we have no other choice than to recognize the limitations of his vision. Paramount among these limitations is his vision of human perfection and *personhood,* handicapped as it is by the dogmatic consciousness of the Roman Catholic West.[416] By way of conclusion, we will stress in the next few pages the uniqueness of Elder Sophrony's vision of human perfection and *personhood.* Akin to Christ's word to Saint Silouan that came providentially at the "hour of darkness" (*cf.* Luke 22:53), we also believe that Elder Sophrony's teaching regarding human perfection and *personhood* is a singular and essential word for our generation.

The anthropology of Elder Sophrony preserves the uniqueness of the human person. Each *person* is inimitable miracle and thereby each *person* has a unique path to God. Both John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony discern a general pattern in the spiritual life and to a certain degree their observations coincide. Both perceive three general stages within the life of a Christian: a first grace, a long period of trial, and a return of grace in a more perfect and

[415] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 236.
[416] The Church of Rome and Western Europe is commonly referred to as the "West," principally after the schism of 1054, when The Church of Rome broke communion with the four Eastern Churches (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem).

permanent form. In addition, both authors see pride as the primary culprit for the loss of grace at the first stage. However, even at this level their evaluations diverge.

According to John of the Cross, pride is inherent in the beginner due to the dominance of the lower soul and its tangible, sensory approach to spiritual life. In Elder Sophrony's writings, pride is not inherent to the first visitation of grace. He remarks that in some cases, the beginner is given a share of the grace of the perfect.[417] Thus, it is not a limitation of the grace given that engenders pride in the beginner, but rather the right hand noticing what the left has received (cf. Matt 6:3). Pride comes to the beginner and threatens to snatch away the seed sown (cf. Lk. 8:5). It is only the lack of skill in defending against such thoughts that allows pride to plant its bitter root in the heart and bring to an end the first visitation of grace. Elder Sophrony envisions the spiritual life as a sphere: even the first visitation of grace contains the fullness of Divine Life and Light. Thus, Elder Sophrony's vision of the spiritual life differs greatly from the rigid divisions and linear progression of St. John's quaternarian model. Even is his discussion of the beginning stage of spiritual life, Elder Sophrony reflects a vision of the uniqueness of human personhood that John of the Cross lacks.

The principal concern of John of the Cross is the second stage: the experience of the Dark Night. We should bear in mind that, according to John's concept of Christian life, a person never fully progresses past the Dark Night while still bound to the body. Until bodily death, God is primarily experienced as the Dark Night. Positive vision (i.e the Beatific Vision) can occur only *after* bodily death.[418] By contrast, Elder Sophrony teaches that the dark abyss is a heart filled with

[417] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 68
[418] It is to be noted that within the Orthodox Tradition there is a strong consciousness of the body's participation in God's deifying energies. Cf. St. Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of the Holy Hesychast.*

pride, which the Divine Light reveals.[419] God is never equated with darkness. It must be admitted that Elder Sophrony occasionally uses language very close to St. John's by which God is described as a consuming fire.[420] Likewise, John of the Cross also speaks of the experience of God's gentle Light and does not equate God with Darkness *per se*, the Darkness is only His effect upon a soul not yet purified.

Nevertheless, each author is faithful to his respective tradition. In describing the Dark Night, John reflects a long-standing Roman Catholic interpretation of Dionysius: God, in this life, can be most fully experienced only as blindness and the suspension of the soul.[421] Elder Sophrony, by contrast, reflects the experience of the Eastern Church Fathers, notably St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) and St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), who affirmed that God's Divine, Uncreated energies could be seen in this life with one's bodily eyes, albeit transfigured and "Spirit-ualized" by the Holy Spirit.[422] For Elder Sophrony, the Dark Night of Godforsakenness, while a necessary experience, does not constitute the fullest vision of God in earthly life. Thus, while affirming the necessity and benefit of the grace of Godforsakenness, the Dark Night is not the primary focus of Elder Sophrony's witness to our generation.

Every journey is defined by its goal. Teachings concerning spiritual life, even at the elementary level, are informed by one's vision of human perfection. John's view of human perfection is the offspring of the Roman Catholic West, Augustine being the progenitor and Aquinas the most articulate forefather. John's teaching on human perfection noticeably lacks the

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[419] Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 30.
[420] Cf. ibid., 147.
[421] Cf. The interpretation of Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology,* V (PG 91:1048ab).
[422] Cf. St. Gregory Palamas, "The human mind . . . transcends itself, and by victory over the passions acquires an angelic form. It, too, will attain to that light and will become worthy of a supernatural (υπέρφυσιν) vision of God. One sees, not in a negative way—for one does see something—but in a manner superior to negation" *Triads,* I.iii.4 (G., 32).

originality of thought that characterizes his discussion of the Dark Night. His labored reliance upon Augustine and Aquinas gives the impression that he was not experientially acquainted with the final stages of spiritual life. He relies upon speculation and the teachings of his predecessors rather than on divine vision (θεωρία). Moreover, in accordance with his tradition he denies even the possibility of such a vision. We must then ask ourselves, "If John denies the possibility of seeing the destination of our spiritual journey, how accurate of a guide can he be?"

John is not to be held personally at fault. No one, reading his writings, can doubt that he possessed a genuine experience of God. In his shortsighted view of human perfection he merely reflects the deficiencies of the West that exchanged the θεωρία of the Desert for the speculation of the lecture hall. The positive vision was lost and replaced by logical conjecture. It is true that, within the West, some taught the necessity of positive vision. John's contemporary, Teresa of Avila, wrote, "We need no wings to go in search of [God] but have only to find a place where we can be alone and *look upon Him* present within us."[423] Yet, this vision is a mental one (*oración mental*),[424] it is the vision granted by means of the prayer of meditation (διαλογισμική προσευχή). It is not the θεωρία that illumined the Church Fathers of the Orthodox Church.[425] It is a psychological stage of prayer, radically deficient when compared to the pure prayer (καθαρή προσευχή) that Elder Sophrony lived.[426]

In the absence of θεωρία, the West developed a very different understanding of God and by extension, the human *persona*. Earlier, in chapter two, we explored the Augustinian

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[423] Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection,* 28 (K. 114). *Emphasis added.*
[424] Cf. Idem., "Mental prayer [oración mental] is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us." *The Book of Her Life,* 8 (K., 96).
[425] Cf. St. Isaac the Syrian (+700) Homily 23, *On the many different kinds of prayer,* "Prayer is one thing, and the divine vision (θεωρία) of prayer is another, even though each takes its inception from the other. For prayer is the seed, and the divine vision is the harvesting of the sheaves."
[426] Cf. Hill, p. 88.

conception of the Trinity.[427] This view began with the Oneness of Divine Nature and perceived the Three Divine Persons as being an attribute of this one supra-personal Nature. Furthermore, we saw that the Holy Spirit is the Love shared between the Father and the Son and the difficulty in perceiving Him as equally personal. The conception of the Divine Persons eclipsed by the Divine Essence naturally leads to an eclipsed conception of human *personhood*. John of the Cross reflects this understanding in his teachings concerning the positive outcome of the Dark Night. *Personhood,* in the third and final stage of perfection is eclipsed, minimized, and nearly brought to *nothing* (*nada*). The soul is stripped of everything created and only God remains.

Elder Sophrony writings concerning human perfection reflect the highest level of divine vision (θεωρία) and his encounter with the *person* of Saint Silouan. His teachings regarding the mystery of the Holy Trinity and consequently upon the mystery of *personhood*, issue from his personal vision of the true Person: the God-Man Jesus Christ in the Glory of the Uncreated Light. He attests, "More than once it was given to me to contemplate Divine Light."[428] His vision is confirmed by the dogmatic consciousness of the Orthodox Church, nurtured by two millennia of hesychast theologians. In particular, his teachings reflect his personal encounter with Saint Silouan, whom he considered to be God's greatest gift to him and a preeminent model of *personhood.*

According to John of the Cross, the highest form of human perfection is attained in Spiritual Marriage in which the soul is united to and absorbed (*absorta*) in Him."[429] In Spiritual Marriage, there exists such a great degree of unity between the soul and God that the two appear as one. John writes, "Her intellect will be the intellect of God, her will then will be God's will, and

[427] Cf. Hill, pp. 38-39.
[428] Sophrony, *On Prayer,* 48.
[429] John, *Living Flame,* 2.34 (K., 671).

thus her love will be God's love . . . for the two wills are so united that there is only one will and love, which is God's."[430] John thereby exposes his reliance upon Western understanding of the Trinity in his anthropology, emphasizing unity of nature to the exclusion of *personhood.* In his concept of Spiritual Marriage, there is no room for the *other,* there is nothing (*nada*) but God.

On the other hand, Elder Sophrony and the tradition that he represents, teaches that Divine Being is hypostatic Being. Divinity does not proceed from a supra-personal source but from the three *Persons* of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone because the Person of the Father is the source of Divine Life. The Father perpetually and ineffably empties Himself into the Son and to the Holy Spirit in an eternal mode of self-emptying, each in a unique and distinct mode of generation. The Son and the Holy Spirit likewise exist in an eternal mode of self-emptying, giving their whole Being back to the Father.[431] The Holy Trinity, in turn, shares their Life with creation through the Divine and Uncreated Energies, experienced as Light, Grace, Love, and Humility. The Human person does not share or perceive the Divine Essence, *Who* God is, but experiences all the same God Himself in His outpouring of Grace.

Human being can exist only by means of this outpouring of Divine Life. Likewise, human perfection consists in living by the same mode by which the Holy Trinity lives: self-emptying. The grace of Godforsakenness has this as its one goal: to awaken in man this divine mode of being. *Personhood* consists in self-emptying love by which a man embraces God and the whole world in his being. Whereas in John of the Cross, the Dark Night comes dangerously close to leading a person into non-being: the eradication of the *other*; in Elder Sophrony's vision, the grace of Godforsakenness leads to the discovery of genuine personhood and the maximalization

[430] Ibid., 38.3 (K., 619).
[431] Cf. Sophrony, *We Shall See Him,* 139.

of the *other*. There exists in both authors a certain momentum toward the love of God to the point of self-hatred. However, in Elder Sophrony this hatred reveals the true self, unmasked of pride; whereas in John of the Cross, this hatred leads to the denudation of the *self* in a passive beatific vision of a supra-personal Divine Essence.

Through the grace of Godforsakenness, the Christian "strips himself of all created images."[432] There exists a synergy (συνεργία) in this process: the Creator pours this grace upon his creature, but the creature "strips *himself* of all created images." Moreover, the Orthodox Ascetic, writes Elder Sophrony, does this "in order to pray to God, *face to Face*."[433] Whereas, in the teachings of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, the highest form of prayer is mental prayer (*oración mental*) in which the soul *feels* or mentally "sees" God within her, in Elder Sophrony's experience the highest form of prayer is pure prayer (καθαρή προσευχή) in which the ascetic speaks to God *face to Face* (cf. Ex. 33:11), *person to Person*.

The understanding of what it means to be a person is critical for our generation and this understanding is made increasingly fragile as our culture moves farther and farther from the vision of God, the Paradigm of *personhood*. John of the Cross offers certain important contributions to our generation in his encouragement and psychological insight into the experience of the Dark Night. However, we should treat with caution his conception of human perfection, bearing in mind the mold in which these thoughts were formed. Elder Sophrony himself held in high estimation the writings of the Spanish mystic. Nevertheless, he was mindful of the vast abyss that lay between the vision of *personhood* of the Eastern Church Fathers and

[432] Idem., *Saint Silouan,* 157.
[433] Ibid.

that of the West. His vision of *personhood* led him to very different conclusions than those of John of the Cross regarding the virtue of the Dark Night of Godforsakenness.

Elder Sophrony brings to us a unique word of comfort and light to the Dark Night of our age. Judging from the examples we have explored, one from the 16th century, the other from the 20th, we can more broadly conclude that the experience of the Dark Night spans time and culture. It is a universal experience, common to all those who have, if only once, tasted God's grace. Both John of the Cross and Elder Sophrony argue for the necessity and the benefit of the Dark Night and this can bring a some measure of comfort to those suspended above the abyss of non-being and seeing no choice but to fall. However, Elder Sophrony perceives with especial clarity the purpose of God's withdrawal. Born out of his vision of God in the Uncreated Light and aided by the tradition that nurtured this gift, Elder Sophrony presents our generation with a vision of the opposite side of the abyss: the vision of what it means to be a person. To be a person is a beautiful thing, to be a person means to strive for Eternal Being, to empty oneself of all self-love, to know (γινώσκω) God and to be known by Him.

"Now, O Christ, by the gift of Thy love which passeth all understanding

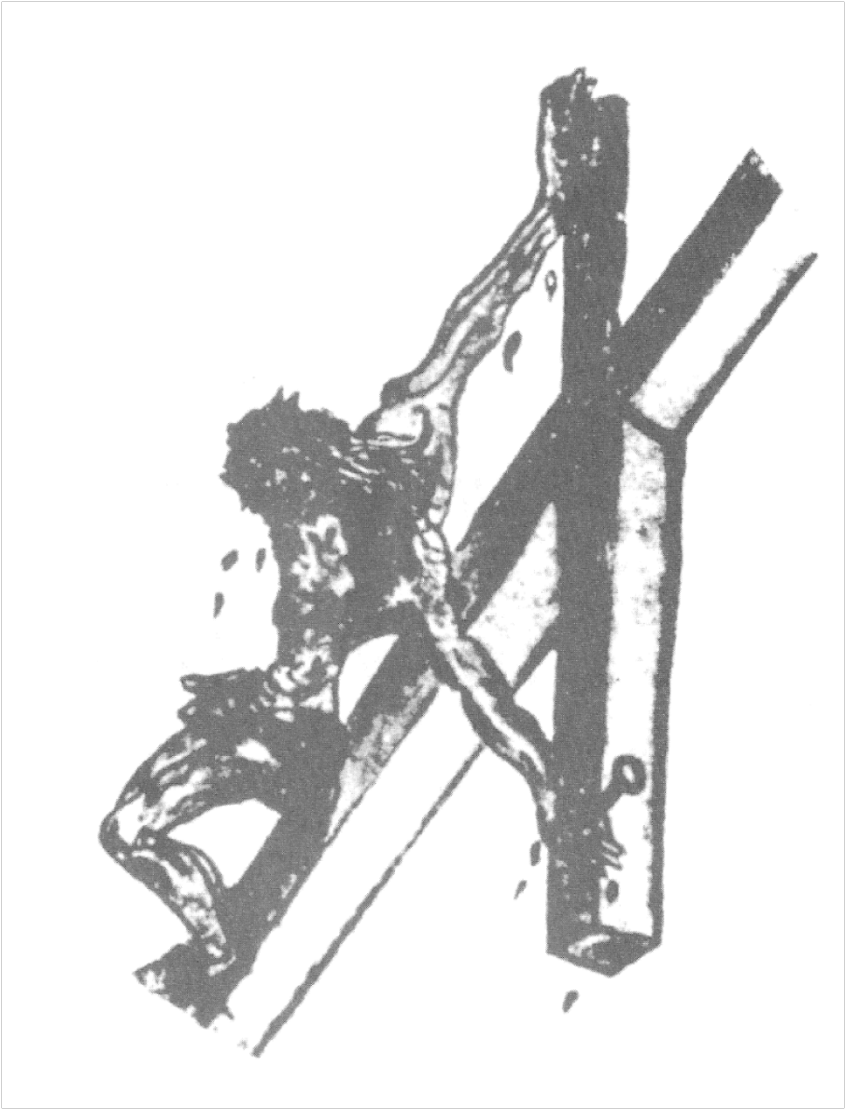
I, too, have crossed from death to life . . . Now—I am."

--Elder Sophrony, *His Life is Mine*

APPENDIX

Plate 1

Crucified Christ, John of the Cross (c. 1570's)



From Kieran Kavanaugh, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*

Plate II

Monte Carmelo, John of the Cross (c. 1579)

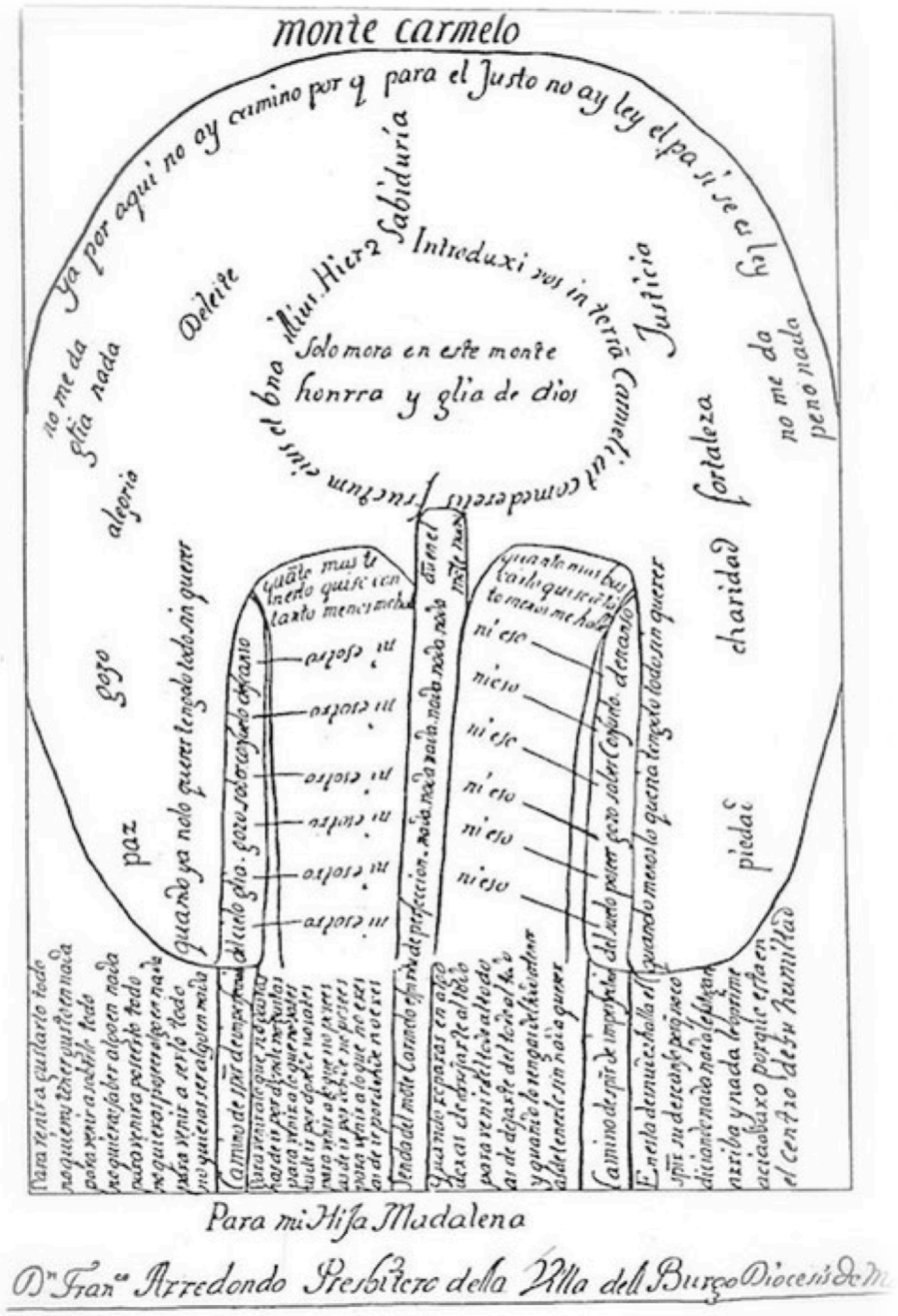
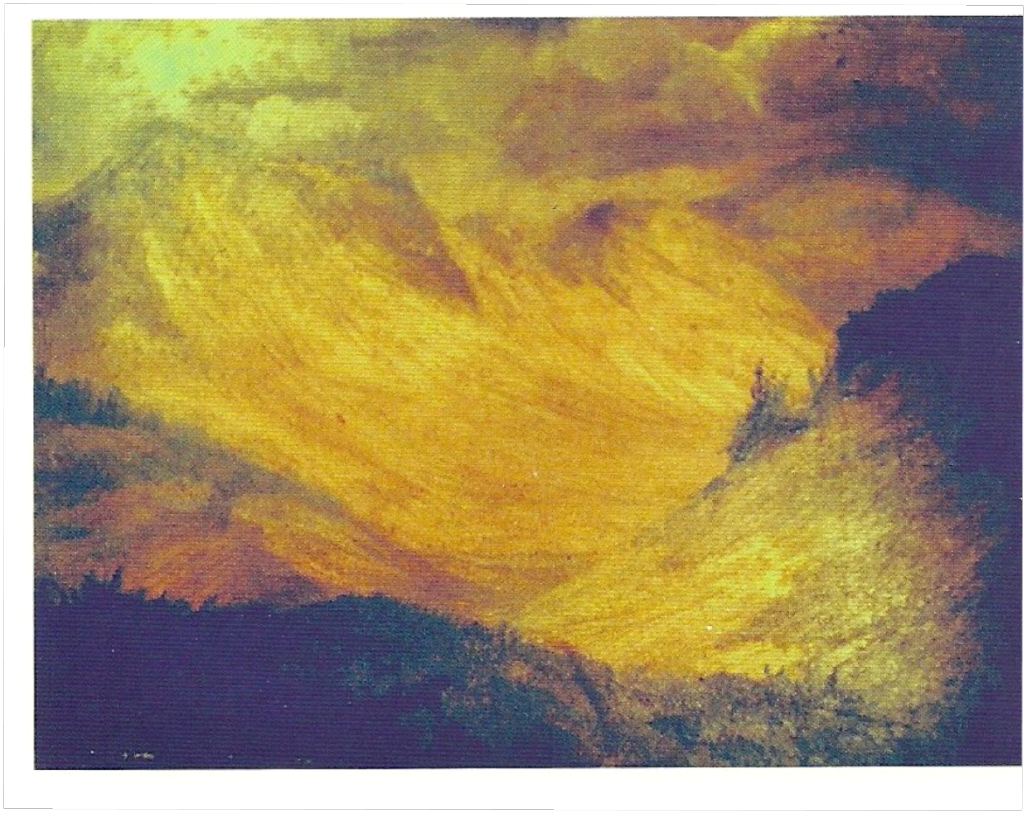


GRAFICO DEL MONTE CARMELO
tracciato da S. Giovanni della Croce
Bibl. Naz. Madrid, Ms. 6296

Plate III

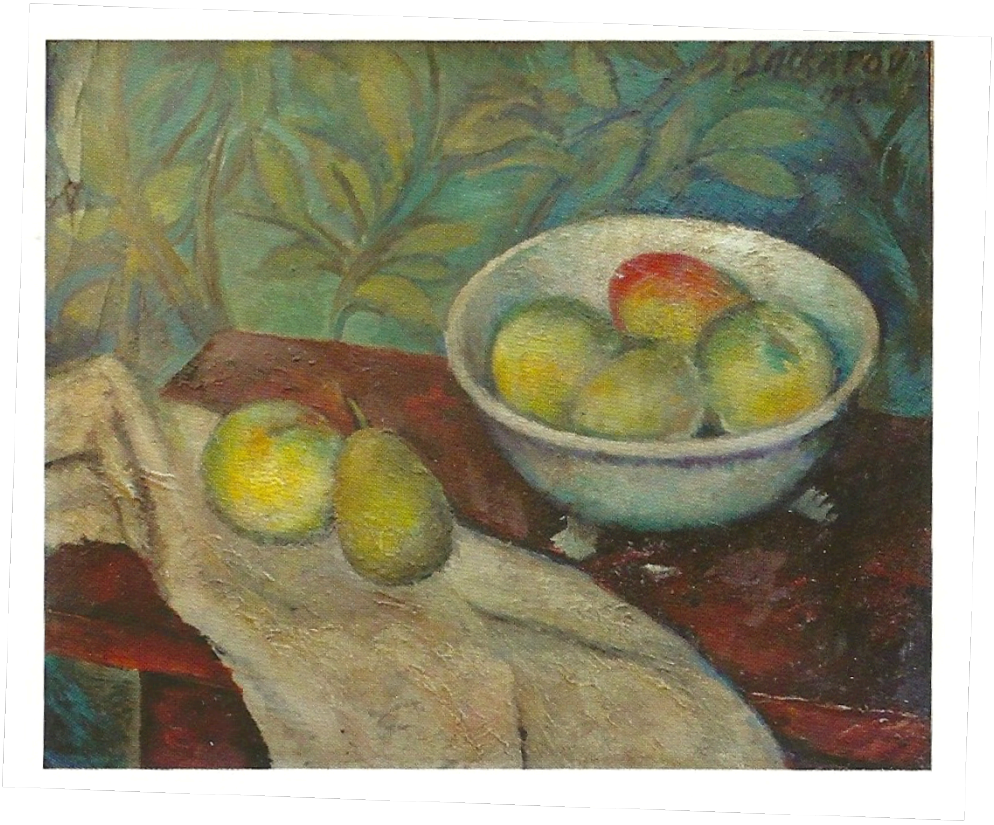
Dunes, Sergei Sakharov (early 1920's)



From Sister Gabriela, *Being: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony*

Plate IV

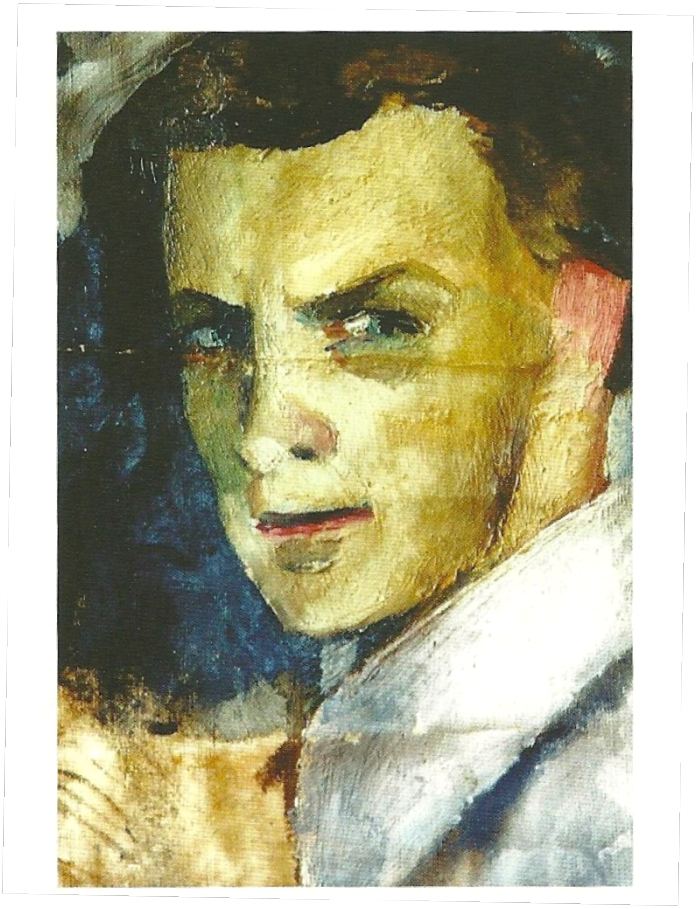
Still Life, Sergei Sakharov (1922)



From Sister Gabriela, *Being: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony*

Plate V

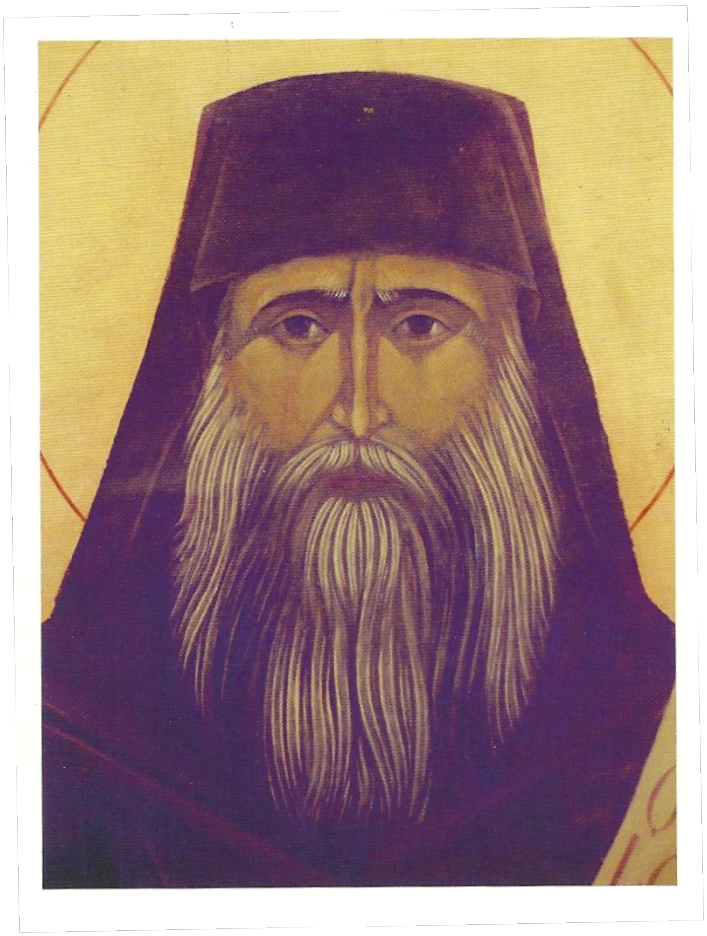
Self-Portrait, Sergei Sakharov (1918)



From Sister Gabriela, *Being: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony*

Plate VI

Saint Silouan, Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) (1988)



From Sister Gabriela, *Being: The Art and Life of Father Sophrony*

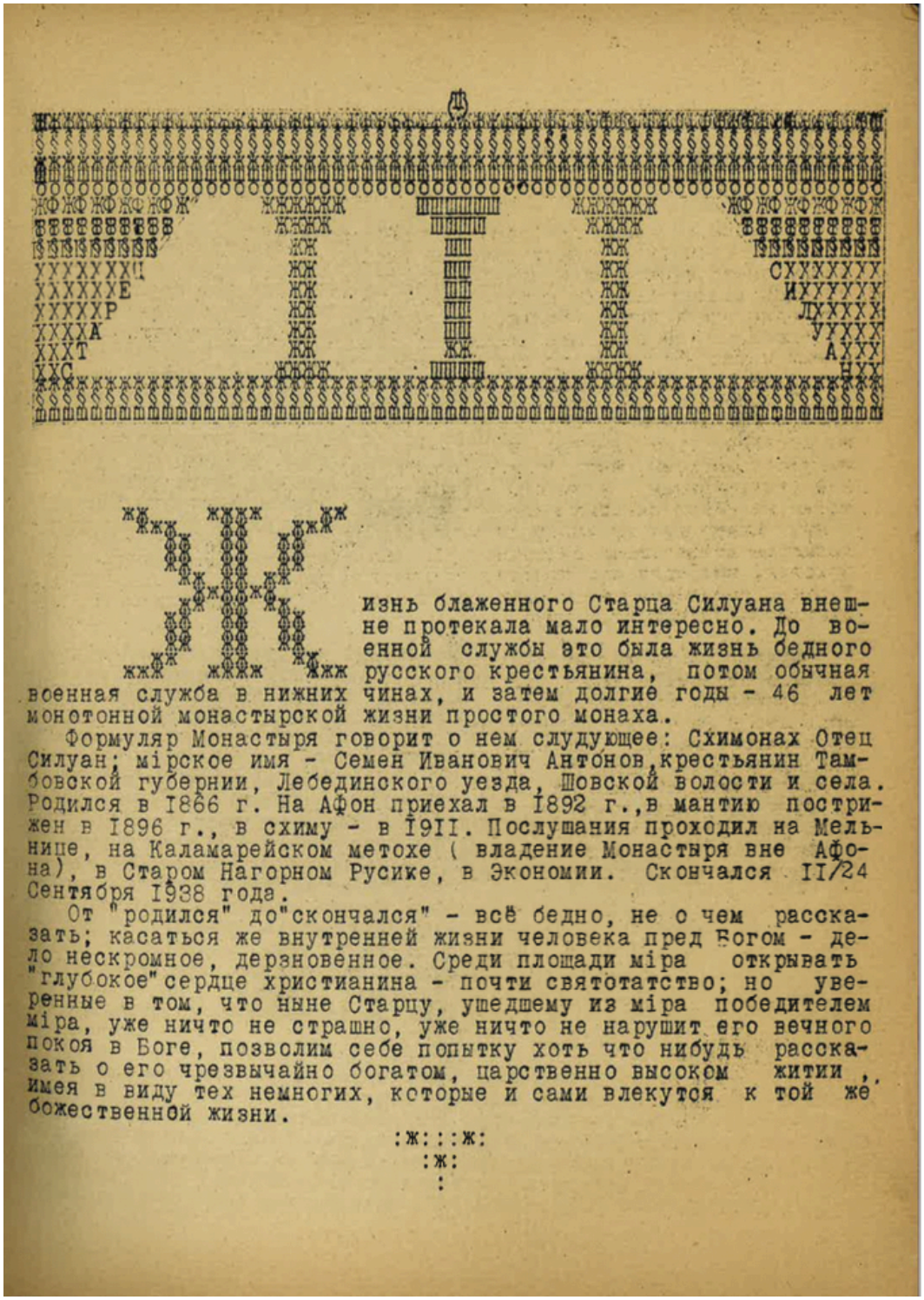
Plate VII

Cave of the Holy Trinity, Monastery of St. Paul: Karoulia, Mount Athos.

From Metropolitan Hierotheos, *"I Know a Man in Christ"*

Plate VIII

Старец Силуана, Page 1 of Archimandrite Sophrony's 1948 roneo-typed edition of *Staretz Silouan*.



Жизнь блаженного Старца Силуана внешне протекала мало интересно. До военной службы это была жизнь бедного русского крестьянина, потом обычная военная служба в нижних чинах, и затем долгие годы - 46 лет монотонной монастырской жизни простого монаха.

Формуляр Монастыря говорит о нем слудующее: Схимонах Отец Силуан; мірское имя - Семен Иванович Антонов, крестьянин Тамбовской губернии, Лебединского уезда, Шовской волости и села. Родился в 1866 г. На Афон приехал в 1892 г., в мантию пострижен в 1896 г., в схиму - в 1911. Послушания проходил на Мельнице, на Каламарейском метохе (владение Монастыря вне Афона), в Старом Нагорном Русике, в Экономии. Скончался 11/24 Сентября 1938 года.

От "родился" до "скончался" - всё бедно, не о чем рассказать; касаться же внутренней жизни человека пред Богом - дело нескромное, дерзновенное. Среди площади міра открывать "глубокое" сердце христианина - почти святотатство; но уверенные в том, что ныне Старцу, ушедшему из міра победителем міра, уже ничто не страшно, уже ничто не нарушит его вечного покоя в Боге, позволим себе попытку хоть что нибудь рассказать о его чрезвычайно богатом, царственно высоком житии, имея в виду тех немногих, которые и сами влекутся к той же божественной жизни.

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